"A WILD, EXCITING AND THOROUGHLY SATISFYING COLLISION OF OTHERWORLDLY HORROR AND DEDUCTIVE REASONING"

JONATHAN MABERRY, bestselling author of *Predator One*

SHERLOCK HOLMES VS. CTHULHU

THE ADVENTURE OF THE DEADLY DIMENSIONS

LOIS H. GRESH

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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CTHULHU
THE ADVENTURE OF THE
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THE ADVENTURE OF THE DEADLY DIMENSIONS

LOIS H. GRESH

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DEDICATED WITH LOVE TO ARIE BODEK
AND BIG DADDY SAM

WITH GRATITUDE TO ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE
AND H.P. LOVECRAFT

PROLOGUE

AMOS BEILER

October 1890, Avebury, Wiltshire

The chair was a masterpiece of dimensions. I wanted to wake Kristoffer, my son, so he could see it, but he was fast asleep in the house.

Someday he would create a Beiler masterpiece of his own, and then he would stand here instead of me, chant the words, and unleash all that is wondrous and beautiful in the world. But not now.

This was my time.

One more tweak, and it would be ready.

My hands shook from excitement. I rubbed them together, warming them. Then I removed my spectacles, brushing the blood from my forehead, and placed them carefully on the work bench next to the ancient instructions. How would my brethren react when they learned what I'd done? Would they rejoice, would they worship me?

Would the Old Ones finally return?

Would I be the one to open the gate?

I snapped my braces once against my work shirt. Dear Amelia had embroidered the yellow leopards at the tops of the straps, and it had become tradition to snap them as I finished a particularly important piece of furniture. Perhaps the sting against my chest jarred me into the moment.

Poor Amelia was long gone, had died terribly fifteen years ago. It was right after I'd finished the cherry divan for Lord Wiltshram. I'd not built a divan since.

Grasping the corner of the chair, I fitted a bracket to it. The screw turned easily, securing the seat to the front leg. On my braces the leopards growled, the sound coming from low in their throats. I stroked them.

Soon, I thought. *Soon all will be revealed*.

Outside, the wind slammed the barn from all sides. It was a particularly harsh night. The walls quaked. The door clattered against its frame. Rain pounded, and the storm howled. No doubt the leaves would be stripped

from the trees by morning. Given the nature of what was to come, it would be a miracle if the trees still stood at all.

The rafters groaned as if in pain.

“The time is now!” I said, my voice rising to a scream. “Come, I release you. *Come!*”

Even more than before, the ceiling creaked and the lantern flickered wildly. A wooden beam broke and smashed to the floor, maimed and severed from above. It writhed upon the floor—*writhed*—and then it shuddered a final time and died. Shards of wood rained down and stabbed me, then bullets of water. One hit the middle of my forehead. I cringed, shook my head, blinked…

And then I looked up. The black hole of night yawned over me. Its lips stretched, wider and wider. From its maw came the water, a powerful rush streaming through the hole in the ceiling. It ricocheted off the walls and splashed against my face, mixing with my blood and soaking into my shirt.

Struck by a powerful gust of wind, I fell against a wall. The chair clattered to the floor. A spasm of pain tore at my chest. I clutched it, fearing the worst.

Not now!

Over on the work bench, the oil lamp sputtered and almost went out, then crackled back to life. Abruptly the hole above me withered. The rain petered to a drip.

Quickly I regained my senses. I dove for the chair, grasped it, and dragged it to a corner of the room. It was such fine ash, the angles carved with perfect precision. There was no other chair like it, not anywhere in the world. Stepping over to the battered table by the door, I snatched up a rag then scooted back to the chair and wiped the water off its limbs.

Then I returned to my work bench to consult the diagrams that had passed down countless generations to me. We were the Beilers, the finest woodworkers and craftsmen in all of England. Our pieces had dovetail joints, smooth finishes, and intricate etchings that no other man had ever been able to duplicate.

The drawings and symbols were so ancient they were written on yellowed animal hide and inked in the maroon of old blood. In the top left corner of the hide was the image of a table adorned with elaborate symbols.

Twenty years ago, I made that table and gave it to Lord and Lady Ashberton of Avebury. Ten years ago, I made the cedar chest, hinged it just

so, and carved the symbols in ordained arrangements on the inner surfaces.

I'd left the chair for last. It was the most difficult of the three items described on the hide. The symbols were so complex that it had taken me months to create them, often using tools of my own making.

Now I stared at my creation. It was perfect. The etchings rose in bas relief, they curled and whirled, they overlapped. The symbols reached through my eyes into my brain. They tapped into that place where my soul fluttered.

I scooped a metal plate from my work bench, then crouched in front of the chair. My fingers caressed the symbols I'd burned into the plate. Heat flowed from the symbols down my arm and crackled into my brain. I let the warmth rise over and through me, let it crash down like waves.

Now was the time.

Steadying myself as best I could, I nailed the plate to the chair exactly at the midpoint between the two ends of the brace. With shaking hands, I lifted the ancient instructions, uttered the syllables inked at the bottom of the animal hide. I had no idea if my pronunciation was correct, for the letters were alien to me. I just did my best, based on what my father and grandfather had taught me.

As I chanted the words, I imagined the faces of my brethren, gazing at me with wonder, mesmerized by my mastery.

"*Q'ulsi pertaggen fh'thagn daghon da'agon f'hthul'rahi roa*," I intoned.

The oil lamp sputtered.

"*Q'ulsi fh'thagn perhagen n'creechilckcklon*."

The light flashed a bright yellow. I cringed and squeezed my eyes shut, but still I continued from memory.

"*Q'ulsi cantatro'f'b'f'w'l'llllcccckkkkk!*"

A bright light burned through my right eyelid. Pain exploded in my brain and careened around my skull. My eye sizzled. Clutching my face, I sank to my knees, suppressing a scream. My right eye felt as if it had boiled over. Liquid oozed down my cheek.

I gagged as the bile surged in my throat. The world slipped in and out of existence. Toppling over, I rolled to my side, hands clawing my forehead and cheeks, fingers smeared with the ooze of my eye.

My left eye snapped open, and I saw the abomination. Instantly I knew it would have been better not to have seen it.

The entire chair throbbed. The etched symbols beat like a thousand hearts. Light shattered the black of the room, overwhelming the flickering lamp. Above me, the maw yawned again, stretching greater than before, lips pulled back into the night. The rain resumed, dripping like saliva. The stars, shining through the downpour, were sharp, sharp teeth. Descending. Coming closer.

And then came the eyes. Glowing. Red. Of such dimensions I cannot describe them. Like the eyes of a million insects glued into one, yet unlike the eyes of any creature I'd ever seen. Eyes that pulsed in time with the chair. Eyes that bore down upon me, and within their depths throbbed the symbols, the horrible symbols I'd carved.

Eyes, infinite eyes…

PART ONE

THE INFERNAL MACHINE

1

DR. JOHN WATSON

October 1890, London

The night murmured. Leaves tossed themselves to the wet cobblestones of Baker Street. The overhead lamps leaked a yellow that made the raindrops spark like fireflies. It was good to be back with my dear friend, Sherlock Holmes, even if I was only visiting for the evening, and soon would return to Mary and our newborn son, Samuel.

I peered pensively from the window, as was my custom. Holmes smoked his pipe and riffled through the newspapers. Despite my mood, I felt at home with the dense smoke, the crackle of the paper, and Holmes's derisive snorts as he scanned the articles.

"Why, look at this, Watson," he said. "Four more are dead in the East End. Eviscerated, all of them. In each case, the police find their bones heaped into bizarre configurations. The intestines, brains, and limbs are smeared around the scene. According to the reports, the bodies look half *eaten*. I'd say this is even more grotesque than Jack the Ripper." He paused. "Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard has no comment about possible suspects."

"Yes, I've been following the case." I flipped back my coat-tails and settled into the armchair across from Holmes. Though the warmth from the fireplace seeped through my damp clothes and into my skin, I shivered slightly. Holmes pursed his lips, then tapped his pipe twice on the stem and puffed. Releasing the smoke in curls, he crossed his legs. He was excited by the mysterious events in the area of London he visited when desperate for opium. I knew his excitement meant he would have no need for the needle and drugs he kept hidden in the mahogany box in his desk.

"What do you make of it, then?" he asked.

As a medical doctor, I'd seen a lot of corpses, but never anything as gruesome as what was described in the newspapers. "The strangest aspect, Holmes, is how they say the bones are heaped. The geometries differ, but

the precision is always exacting, and inside each stack of bones is a bizarre —”

“Yes, the spherical objects.” Holmes narrowed his eyes. “Each is about 30 centimeters in diameter and apparently composed of bone, chiseled with arcane symbols that differ from object to object. Each has a hole the size of an eye, and if you look through that hole, you can see the opposite side of the sphere. Engraved there is a single symbol that also differs in each case. Most intriguing, wouldn’t you say?”

“The press jokes that a killer mathematician is on the loose.” In spite of myself I suppressed a chuckle. “I somehow doubt it. Killers tend not to be found among the ranks of the Oxford Club.”

“Indeed, they don’t, and besides, these symbols aren’t mathematical. They’re something quite different, Watson.” Holmes leaned toward me, and his elbow jostled the small gothic revival table that stood by his chair. His cup jittered on the saucer, but he seemed not to notice. He was in that state of mind he entered when focused on a problem.

To keep my thoughts clear, I had to look away from his gaze.

“The fact that the corpses appear to be half eaten leads me to think that perhaps the killer is—” I hesitated and glanced at Holmes. What I was about to suggest seemed absurd. “I know this sounds odd, but the killer might be a cannibal.”

I braced myself.

But Watson, he would say, *if there were cannibals in London, I would have been informed before now*. His eyes would light with amusement, then he would say, *Think more carefully. You’re missing the obvious*.

Yet Holmes surprised me by taking the notion seriously.

“This isn’t a cannibal, my dear fellow,” he said. “No, not at all. Consider. There are no tooth marks on the bones. No gnawing. No knife marks. No bullet wounds—indeed, no bullets ever found at the scenes. And the *spherical* bones, the weird symbols, Watson. It’s all quite perplexing.”

“Do you have any notions about it?”

“The only tangible fact is that all the murders took place in the East End, where crime is rampant. Police found three corpses in an alley next to the building that runs the new tram system. The fourth corpse was inside the building. I admit, Watson, that I’m puzzled. It is a challenge.” He peered at me with enough intensity that I began to feel uncomfortable. “I see that you’ve been performing surgery this evening and that it didn’t go well.”

At first, I couldn’t reply. It was true. This was why I’d sought Holmes’s familiar companionship before heading home to Mary and Samuel. Whatever was on Holmes’s mind, be it chemistry or numerology or crime, I’d hoped it would take my mind off the day’s work. Yet I wondered how he knew about the surgery. Since my war service, I only performed surgery during emergencies. Today, I’d encountered such an emergency, and there’d been no time to get my patient to a hospital. I’d attempted to save him as best as I could.

“What makes you say that I performed surgery?” I finally asked.

“The smell of disinfectant you use on your hands after surgery.”

Feeling slightly ridiculous, I lifted both hands and sniffed.

“But I smell nothing!”

“That is because you’ve had it on your hands for an extended time, and hence in your nostrils. You can no longer smell it as I can.”

Quite true, I thought, but I pressed on.

“Perhaps I simply washed my hands with disinfectant,” I countered. “That wouldn’t require me to perform surgery, would it?”

“Ah, the fact that you don’t deny it speaks volumes—I think you toy with me,” Holmes said. “Remember, I know your habits. When you arrived fifteen minutes ago, Mrs. Hudson took your hat. It was then that I deduced that you’d recently removed your surgical mask.”

My perplexed expression prompted him to explain.

“When you wear a surgical mask, the ties that hold it to your head tend to mat your hair. This is what I saw.”

At that, I was forced to surrender.

“I concede that you’re correct,” I admitted. “There was, indeed, an operation. Yet how did you know it didn’t go well?”

“Watson, your patient died on the table.” Holmes frowned, then rose, turned his back to me, and set his pipe on the mantel. For a moment, I couldn’t bring myself to speak, but then it all rushed out.

“I did everything I could to save his life,” I said, “and yes, I failed. Mr. Travelston’s body was too weak to endure the knife. His wife was hysterical afterward. I had to console her. It was all so horrible. She has four small children and no means. She’ll be destitute, and it’s all my fault.”

Holmes turned. His expression softened.

“I am sorry,” he said. “You’re a good man, Watson.”

I usually keep my emotions in check, and rarely do I let death bother me. Mr. Travelston was different, though. I'd been late to my practice that morning, having enjoyed a sumptuous breakfast with Mary and Samuel while a poor man languished, half dead, hoping for a miracle.

"But how did you *know* that he had died?" I asked softly.

"Please accept my apology, dear Watson. I can't help myself when it comes to these matters. I deduce. Logic is all." I nodded, and he continued. "Your fingers are smeared with ink, dear fellow. I know you to be a meticulous man. When you write details about a patient's demise and issue a death certificate, you're always very careful, and then you wash your hands thoroughly. Rarely have I seen you so smudged in ink."

"Indeed, I made a mess of it, and neglected to wash my hands at all," I admitted. "Then I hurried here to Baker Street."

"Indeed, and yet, Watson, that's not what *really* revealed to me that the man had died. The disinfectant, the surgical mask, the ink, they were only minor clues." Again that gaze. "You see, dear fellow, I know you well. You're generally of good cheer, and rarely so moody. You only get this way if a patient dies, and you hold yourself responsible.

"So I know that your patient died," he concluded, "because I know *you*."

He was right, of course. I stared at the dance of the flames in the fireplace. More than anything I wanted to forget Mr. Travelston, his wife, and his four young children.

A rap sounded on the outer door. The sound of footsteps, and Mrs. Hudson called from the hallway.

"Mr. Holmes! There's a visitor for you. He says it's urgent. Shall I let him in?"

"Yes, come upstairs!" Holmes said. "And you will stay, Watson?"

"Of course." I was relieved to have a diversion.

Soon Mrs. Hudson trundled into the room. Her face was weary, and gray hair straggled from her bun. She'd been the housekeeper at 221B Baker Street for as long as I could remember. She was here when Holmes and I first rented these rooms, years before I met my wife and moved across town. She stepped aside and allowed what looked like a soggy tramp into Holmes's flat.

Holmes surveyed the man and sniffed.

"And what can I do for you, sir?" he asked.

“Will you be wanting tea, then, Mr. Holmes?” Mrs. Hudson interjected, her nose wrinkled with distaste.

He flicked his fingers.

“Please go, Mrs. Hudson,” he said brusquely. “Now.”

A flush bloomed on her cheeks. Flustered but accustomed to his behavior, she did as requested.

Holmes stared intently at the man as if deciding his fate, then abruptly gestured to a chair by the fireplace. The fellow smelled as if he hadn’t bathed for months. He wore rags caked in grease and dirt, the cloth stiff. As he fell onto the chair and slouched forward, the seat squished and I cringed.

Holmes perched on a stool by his chemistry bench, where burbled a red-tinted liquid. Numerous microscopy slides littered the surface of the table along with rumpled papers, beakers, and glass tubes. He had written many chemistry monographs, most dealing with esoteric subjects understood by few people in the world, and absently I wondered what he was up to this time.

“The murders,” the tramp muttered. “The bones.”

Instantly, Holmes snapped to attention. His eyes grew keen.

“Ah, you know something about these bizarre deaths, then,” he said. “Pray tell all, such that I can solve this tremendous riddle that puzzles Scotland Yard’s finest.” He remained rigid, awaiting the man’s response.

“What brings you out on a night like this?” I asked as kindly as I could. The man cocked his head, and only my experience with the desperately ill kept me from openly displaying shock at his appearance.

He was no more than twenty-five years old, but balding with his scalp splotched brown. Yellow skin sagged on his cheekbones and chin. When he blinked, strings of pus changed shape in his eyes. The knuckle of his right forefinger constantly jabbed at his nostrils. A nervous tic, I presumed, and most distracting. One nostril was much larger than the other, making his nose appear as if a wrench had twisted it so far that the bones had broken.

“I tell you why I’m ’ere,” he said, and his voice was broken, as well. When he spoke, I could see that he’d lost several teeth. “Me dad spent ’is life buildin’ the machine. Me mum and sisters died early. The machine, it does bad things, it does.”

Interest flared in Holmes’s eyes.

“Ah yes, the machine,” he said encouragingly. “I see. Do you understand, Watson?”

I shook my head, for I hadn’t a clue what the man was talking about. Holmes slicked back his hair, and his chin tilted slightly upward. Directed at our visitor, his words came clipped and fast.

“You are Willie Jacobs, the man who runs the experimental tram line in the East End. Am I right?”

“Why, yes, that is absolutely correct, Mr. ’olmes.”

“Your tram runs via a steam-powered engine, as proved by the grease on your clothes and skin. You work long hours, and rarely leave the building where you tend to this machine. This I know from your complexion, which is sallow from lack of sun.” He paused, then continued. “You’re a bachelor, as no wife would allow her husband to go so long without bathing. Most important, you’re the man who discovered one of the corpses in the East End. The police found the other three. Am I right again?”

“Indeed, you are correct on all accounts.” Willie Jacobs’s eyes widened, and the pus strings stretched thin. His right hand dropped from his nostrils to his lap.

“You’re a man of resources,” Holmes added, leaning forward. “You would have to be, in order to engage in such an experimental endeavor, yet you spend none of your wealth on yourself. Now you’ve come to request my services regarding these violent murders of four individuals, all known to you, I presume.

“Judging from the accounts, the attacks are swift, and no one ever sees the attacker. It’s as if people are there one minute, then gutted and murdered the next, their remains an horrific mess of stacked bones, odd spherical objects, and bloody gore.”

Willie Jacobs flinched. Astonishment swept across his face, and tears sprang into his eyes.

“The dead people seem to have nothing in common other than that three were found in the alley next to your building and the other was—my condolences, sir—your father, Mr. Theodore Jacobs.” Holmes straightened again. “Is this correct, Mr. Jacobs?”

At this, our visitor slumped forward, head in his hands and shoulders heaving. I began to move toward him, but Holmes shook his head and flicked his fingers at me, so I settled back into my chair.

Jacobs drew himself back up and wiped his nose on a dirty sleeve.

“Mr. ’olmes, you are me only ’ope!” he wailed. His whole body quivered, and his legs shook uncontrollably. “They’ll be wantin’ me for

murder! Murder of me own dad! But it wasn't me. It's the machine that's the killer! I know it, and the machine knows it, too."

"Why, come now, Mr. Jacobs, you're distraught," I said. "That's understandable, but seriously, sir, a machine doesn't know what it's doing, nor can it have malicious intent. Surely, there are no witnesses who saw your machine kill anyone."

"Nobody saw *nothin'*," Jacobs spat out, "but I know, and I tell you, the machine knows!" His right hand flew to his nose, the knuckles jabbing wildly at his nostrils.

"Pull yourself together, sir," I said, not knowing quite what to do or say. "Please," I added.

Holmes waited a moment, then spoke.

"Tell me where you got the money to buy the fancy whiskey I smell on your breath," he said. "It isn't ordinary swill."

Our visitor didn't acknowledge Holmes's question.

"M-me dad 'eard about the new electric trams they built up in Blackpool," he said. "'e searched for days, and dug out the drawin's gifted from me great-great-great grandfather, passed down through our family, and they tol' 'im 'ow to build a machine. A steam-powered giant. Me dad called it the beast."

"Your great-great-great grandfather," Holmes replied. "I see… Yet that would have been a long time ago, Mr. Jacobs. Long indeed before such machines could have been built, or even dreamed of."

"But me ancestors 'ad the drawin's," the wretched man protested. "I *swear* they did. I've seen them, and you'd 'ave to be a master o' machinery to interpret them. To anyone who's not good with mechanical things, the diagrams would appear as nonsense." He cocked his head and blinked.

I didn't have to look at Holmes to guess what he was thinking. For me, it was simple logic. Even if the drawings existed—and we had no evidence of that—they couldn't be of the age the man asserted. More disturbing was his claim that the tram machine had killed his father. Such a statement might be designed to hide his own guilt, or it might be the raving of a madman.

Either that, or Willie Jacobs had drunk too much of that fancy whiskey Holmes had noticed.

Another thought occurred to me.

"Why was the machine constructed in so poor a section of town?" I asked. "The newest luxuries typically come to those of greatest wealth first.

Who financed the construction of the tram system where you live, Mr. Jacobs?”

“Excellent question, Watson.” Holmes gestured for our visitor to answer. Abruptly he turned his back on the man, shut his eyes, and waited for the response. He could be curt and even rude at times, but it was all part of his method, which I knew required his keenest focus.

“Me dad was me only livin’ relative.” Jacobs let loose a sob. “I don’t know what I’ll do without ’im. I don’t know ’ow to work the beast on me own.”

I moved to squeeze Jacobs’s shoulder, striving not to wince at the touch. “Please, sir,” I said gently, “you must tell us everything as concisely as you can.” Then I crouched beside his chair. “I know this is hard, but I promise, we will help you. If anyone can help you, it is Mr. Holmes.”

The pus-filled eyes blinked at me. His knuckles jabbed and jabbed at his nostrils. I pretended not to notice.

“After ’e found the diagrams, me dad spent all ’is wakin’ hours frettin’ over the beast,” Jacobs said. “We was too poor for ’im to build it, and ’e’d get mad and shout and break things. Then all o’ a sudden, one day ’e came and tol’ me that someone ’ad offered to finance the experiments. ’e was as ’appy as I’d ever seen ’im.”

“And who made this offer to your father?” Holmes asked.

A long pause.

“Don’t know.”

“Of course you know,” Holmes barked, and the man flinched. “Tell me, sir, or you can leave now.”

“I don’t know,” Jacobs whined. “’e might cut me off for sayin’.”

Holmes stared intently at the man. A smile twitched on his lips.

“And the bones you recently found, the ones reported in today’s newspaper?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Willie Jacobs pulled something from his jacket pocket. It was all I could do not to gasp with amazement. In his hand he held a sphere such as the one described in the newspapers—of bone and covered in chiseled symbols. Over and over, the same pattern repeated.

“May I have it, sir?” Holmes didn’t wait for the answer. He grabbed a cloth from his chemistry table and plucked the object from the man’s hand. When Jacobs began to protest, Holmes silenced him with a gesture, then gently laid it on the table. Lifting his magnifying glass, he peered at the

chiseled symbols. “Most curious. A bone the size of a man’s hand and yet round like a ball. How did you obtain this object?”

“The beast killed me dad last night,” Jacobs said. “We sleep in the machine room, me dad and me. On blankets on the floor. I awoke to an awful sound, a keenin’, a shriekin’ like I’ve only ’eard in me most ’orrifyin’ nightmares.” He shuddered, then continued. “But I woke to it, and it was real. Me dad was there before me, and ’e was wavin’ ’is arms, screamin’ those awful words again.”

“And what words are those, Mr. Jacobs?”

“The ones ’e screams when ’e thinks I don’t ’ear. Words I can’t speak, and not in any language I’ve ever known. Low, growlin’ noises like rabid dogs make. Wails like creatures dyin’. Shrill sounds ’igher than any bird. All o’ it, floodin’ out o’ me dad’s mouth and pourin’ over me like the sounds o’… like you might think a jungle sounds.”

For a moment, he was silent.

“Your father made all this noise?” I asked.

“’e did.” The man nodded, and the horror of the memory was plain on his face.

“And then?” I asked.

“Me dad fell to ’is knees. I tried to leap from me blankets to try and ’elp him, but I couldn’t move. The air was too ’eavy and too ’ot. It pinned me to the floor. I nearly passed out while I watched, not able to do nothin’, as me dad’s body bent farther and farther back from his knees until… until…” The poor man broke off and buried his face in his hands, weeping.

This time, Holmes reached out and placed a hand on Jacobs’s shoulder. He shot me a glance.

I rose, ready to get the brandy.

“Perhaps, Mr. Jacobs, you need a rest before continuing,” I said gently.

With shaking hands, Jacobs waved us away.

“No! If you are to ’elp me, you must know all. This is what you tol’ me.” He looked up, tears and grease streaming down his cheeks. He clasped his hands together, and with his intertwined knuckles, jabbed wildly at his nostrils.

Holmes moved to his chemistry bench, and rested his elbows on it. His eyes flicked from Jacobs to me and back again.

“Then let us get to the end of it, shall we?” he said. “Pray continue.”

Jacobs peered at the ceiling. “Me dad bent back like I tol’ you, as if somethin’ was pushin’ ’im. ’e screamed those accursed words until ’e choked. ’e stopped just as… just as ’is knees broke. ’e fell back, face twisted in pain, and then ’is face caved in, just smashed like it was nothin’ more than a pancake. Me dad’s eyes—” Jacobs broke off again and shuddered. “Me dad’s eyes exploded. Blood everywhere. Skin ripped, bones where ’is face used to be, teeth where ’is mouth used to be.”

This poor man, I thought. Whatever Willie Jacobs had seen, it had been awful. “And then?” I asked.

Jacobs’s face tipped higher toward the ceiling, and his fingers moved rapidly against his enlarged nostril. Holmes caught my eye, and we both shook our heads. The man was clearly out of his mind. He’d seen *something* in that machine room, and his father had died. Yes, all of this rang true. Yet the description of his father’s death made little sense, and the man was a complete wreck.

“And then?” I managed to ask again.

Jacobs snapped his head back down and looked at me. His hands dropped from his face. I stared levelly at him, keeping my face straight.

“I saw what I saw,” Jacobs said. “Me dad’s face was no more. Shadows started writhin’ in the corners o’ the room, and they met in the middle o’ the beast. They came out o’ the beast stronger and darker. They curled and split into bizarre shapes like nothin’ I’ve ever seen. Me dad was dead, ’is body like a pulpy mess on the floor, a mound o’ bones and skin and blood.

“Me ’ead pounded, it ’urt from the weight o’ the air upon me and from the terrible sights before me. I ’ad to shut me eyes. And when the air finally lifted, I opened them, and all was as I tol’ you. All that was left o’ me dad was a stack o’ bones with this sphere in it. Then another sphere rolled off the bones, maybe more, I don’t know… And ’is body… just entrails and… and gore…”

Jacobs’s voice trailed off.

“Did you see anyone?” Holmes asked. “An intruder?”

“No.”

“Was there any evidence that someone else had been in the building last night?”

Jacobs shook his head. “No.”

Holmes paused. I kept quiet, knowing not to interrupt his train of thought.

“And hence, Mr. Jacobs, you deduced that it was the machine that killed your father?”

Jacobs didn’t answer.

“Has the building experienced any ventilation problems recently, any change in the air flow?” Holmes asked.

“No.”

“Other than you and your father, has anyone else worked on the machine recently?”

“Ne’er. Only me and me dad. Nobody’s allowed in the buildin’ but me and me dad.” Jacobs slumped so far over that I feared he might fall from the chair.

Holmes gestured at me, and I ran to pour brandy from the flask we kept on Holmes’s desk. As I poured the liquid, I noticed the hypodermic needle in the open drawer. At the tip of the needle glistened a drop. Gloom sank over me as I thought of Holmes and his drugs, but I tried not to think of it as I held the brandy to our visitor’s lips.

The man sputtered, then grabbed the cup from me and downed the contents. He remained silent for a moment, took a deep breath, and looked to my friend.

“Will you ’elp me, Mr. ’olmes?”

“This is a most singular case, Mr. Jacobs. Tell me, is Scotland Yard after you?”

Jacobs offered his cup, and I poured more brandy, which he drank as quickly as the first round.

“With all the noise, I knew somebody would call the coppers,” he said, calmer now. “I knew once they saw me dad, I’d be pinned for ’is murder. So I ran from the buildin’ as soon as I could. By the time they could ’ave showed up, I was gone.”

Holmes nodded. “I suggest that you continue to hide from the authorities. Stay elsewhere tonight, but we’ll visit you first thing in the morning at the tram building. We won’t keep you there long, I promise. I want you to show me where this horrible thing happened to your father. If it helps, I don’t believe you killed him—and yes, I do believe you saw something extraordinary. More than that, I cannot yet say.”

Holmes flagged me to usher our guest out, and I gave Willie Jacobs money for a carriage and handed him an umbrella. When I returned to the

sitting room, Holmes was smoking his pipe again, and his eyes were at half-mast.

"Something most unusual is happening, Watson," he said without looking up. "We leave for the East End tomorrow, first thing. I need your services. You're coming, I presume."

"Mary won't like my going away for the whole day," I protested, "not when our son is so young."

"You will do them more good by ending this threat as soon as possible," he replied. "Besides, Mary can manage without you. She's quite capable."

I shook my head. I knew Mary wouldn't like the idea of me accompanying Holmes, but I had little willpower when it came to resisting Holmes's requests for my help.

"Tell me," I asked, "how do you think Theodore Jacobs *actually* died? He was alive one moment and dead the next."

"That is the mystery. Indeed, it is, Watson."

"Willie Jacobs makes it sound as if the killer vanished into thin air."

My friend trained his sharp gray eyes upon me. "Indeed, but that defies the laws of science," he replied, and his forehead furrowed. "It is illogical." Then he offered no further comment.

"Yes, so it is," I said after a few awkward moments. I looked around the room. "Be that as it may, I must be off, Holmes. Mary and Samuel await."

Lost in thought, he didn't answer. Then, as I reached for the door, he spoke.

"I will see you at eight, Watson. Mrs. Hudson will provide breakfast." He flashed a smile at me, and his lips twitched in anticipation. "Now, go! I have much to think about."

I stood for a moment by the door and glanced back into the room I'd occupied for so many years with my old friend. He lit a cigarette, and with his back to me, stared into the fire. A mere six steps away was his desk with the box in the open drawer.

He had used the needle recently.

Today.

I knew that I would help him in the morning. How I would explain it to Mary was something I did not yet know.

2

Leaves clung to the wet seat of the carriage. I brushed them aside, then sat beside Holmes. The driver snapped his reins, and the horses trotted off, hooves clattering against the cobblestones.

Holmes fidgeted with his walking stick.

“We have no time for this,” he said.

“It will be only a few moments,” I said in as pleasant a tone as I could muster. “We’ll be on our way before you know it.” Having both Holmes and Mary badgering me on the same morning chafed my nerves.

“Do this for me,” I continued. “After all, Mary was kind enough to let me accompany you on what could be a very dangerous mission. Her only condition was that she first see you for a short time.”

“She intends to chastise me.”

“Perhaps she just wants to show off Samuel to an old friend,” I suggested.

Holmes grumbled something under his breath.

The carriage wheels ground to a halt. I gave the driver a coin and asked him to wait, then Holmes and I climbed the few stairs to the door of the flat I shared with my family.

“Upstairs, just like Baker Street,” he said.

“Exactly.” I flashed him a smile.

On the landing, I knocked once and swung open the door that led to my rooms. Mary was in the rocking chair, Samuel sleeping in her arms. As soon as she saw Holmes, she smiled and stood. Delight flushed over her face.

Abruptly, Holmes turned to me.

“These could be ritual killings,” he said. “The stacks of bones with the spheres and weird symbols… a calling card, of sorts, for a killer of many victims.”

My wife gasped. The baby stirred and whimpered.

“Really, Mr. Holmes!” she said.

Quickly, I tried to remedy the situation. When absorbed by a mystery, Holmes couldn’t focus on trivial matters such as greeting my beloved wife and newborn son. This was just the way he was. I was used to it, but it frustrated me nonetheless.

“This is Mary,” I said. “You remember her, I’m sure.”

Holmes inclined his head. He lifted his top hat and replaced it.

“Of course,” he responded.

I poked at the blanket so Holmes could see Samuel’s face. He’d been born prematurely, and was so tiny that sometimes it scared me.

“And my son,” I said.

Holmes impatiently tapped his walking stick against the plush sofa. His eyes swept the room, drinking in everything for future reference. The blue chairs, the thick rug that we procured shortly after our wedding, and the vases on the side tables. He’d remember the painting of Mary’s father that graced the wall by the kitchen. Nothing would escape him.

“The bones as calling cards would make some sense, except for the singular nature of the arcane spheres,” he said. “What killer would take the time to create elaborately carved round bones, each with different symbol sets all over them, each with a different internal symbol? None of the symbols represent any equations currently known to even our foremost mathematicians and scientists.”

“Holmes!” I interjected. “Surely you can say hello to Mary and look at my son.”

He grimaced. His lids dropped over his eyes, then fluttered up again. He gave Mary a brief and very tight smile, then glanced at the baby. Mary held Samuel in her left arm and extended her right hand. She smiled warmly.

“It is indeed a pleasure to see you again,” she said to Holmes. “I know you’re preoccupied with a case.”

He nodded, briefly held her hand, and released it.

“I’m glad you’re taking such good care of Watson,” he said. “And now we must be off, Watson. Come!” Holmes’s crisp voice awakened Samuel, who squirmed in his swaddling cloth. His face went red, and I knew that at any moment, he would start screaming.

Now *would* be a good time to leave.

Mary was already upset that I’d insisted on going off with Holmes to hunt a killer. Now Holmes had been rude to her. Hoping to mollify my wife, I hugged her and promised that I’d return quickly.

“Yes,” she said, “do so, John.”

Abruptly, she grabbed Holmes’s arm. He looked startled, but remained in her grasp as she issued her orders.

“You will return my husband in one piece, Mr. Holmes,” she said firmly. “You will make sure he is safe. He knows I don’t approve of him taking up with you again. It’s too dangerous for a married man.” She turned to me. “If not for my sake, then be careful for your son’s sake.”

Holmes’s eyes shrunk to slits.

I was anxious to be on my way before I had to referee an argument between the two of them. So I steered Holmes to the door, and suggested that he wait outside in the carriage.

He needed no encouragement.

Then I gave my wife a proper goodbye. She kissed my cheek. Her eyes were teary. That was when Samuel started screaming. Mary cooed and cooed, but our son would have none of it, and kicked her in the ribs.

I backed away from them toward the door, then at the last second, turned and walked back. Mary clenched my left arm and pulled me close. Samuel’s tears splashed hot across my skin. My throat tightened. Even Samuel’s tears felt tiny.

The baby was everything to me—he and his mother.

“Hush, Samuel,” I whispered. “Daddy won’t let anything happen to you.” I rested a finger on his cheek, coarse skin on angel silk. Such tiny gray eyes, along with fat cheeks and a mop of black hair.

Mary stroked my hand, and I would never forget that touch. It was soft like the flutter of a butterfly’s wings.

“Be careful, John,” she said.

She was beautiful, my Mary. Sandy-blonde hair and blue eyes, a gentle face. Her heart was beautiful, too.

And yet there had always been something about Holmes that I couldn’t resist. If not for him, my life would have been nothing but consultations, shepherd’s pies, and long walks in the evenings. I found him fascinating and brilliant, felt energized when I was with him. I felt alive. I worried about Holmes’s addiction to drugs, yet it was partly for selfish reasons, for what would I do without him in my life?

Perhaps my addiction to Holmes was as dangerous as his addiction to cocaine and morphine.

I broke free from Mary, and forgetting to tell her that I loved her, I raced from the flat, then leaped into the carriage where Holmes waited.

*

The tram lines buzzed, powered by the overhead cables of Willie Jacobs's machine. Holmes stared at the poles set along the side of the street and tapped his walking stick against one of them. Then he pointed his stick toward Osborn Street.

"Come, Watson!"

I hurried past Randolph's Cigars and Fine Liquors, and then past Seaway's Fresh Fish, all the while holding my breath. From the odor, I would lay bets the fish was anything but fresh.

Children seemed to pop from nowhere and cluster around me, beggars all of them.

"Please, mister, give a coin, just one coin!"

I'd never gotten used to the orphans that Holmes and I employed from time to time on Baker Street. We thought of them as the Baker Street Irregulars, but such irregulars lived on the streets of every city in every country.

Digging some spare change from my pocket, I gave it to the children, who ran off and left us in peace.

Holmes was already ahead of me, cutting a sharp and fine figure amidst the crowds of ragged men and women hawking everything from newspapers—

—to brightly colored flowers and fruits. In front of every third or fourth building, women stood holding their children, with signs reading *Hungry* and *Please Feed*. A baby carriage careered past, pushed by a woman in a broadcloth dress. She was hatless and without gloves.

Someone poked my shoulder, and I jumped. I twisted and brought back my arm to unleash a punch. But it was Holmes. He'd returned for me, and his face was anxious and pinched.

"Come, Watson, we must make haste!" he insisted. "Let us find Willie Jacobs and his tram machine. Come, come!"

I nodded and trotted after him. His long legs and lean body, not to mention his quick pace, were a tough match for my own short and somewhat overfed form. The perks of having a wife included eating and

sleeping more than I used to do when rooming at 221B Baker Street. Despite Mary's pampering, though, I remained in excellent shape, due in part to my years of military service. I felt up to the task and excited to be with Holmes again.

Suddenly, he whirled.

"Notice the tracks in the street, Watson," he said, and he pointed. Set within the cobblestones along the right side of the street were two evenly placed tracks, each wide enough to accommodate cab wheels.

"These are for the trams," I said.

"Indeed." His gaze shifted. "Steel tram wheels move along these tracks, which contain grounding wires. Electricity powers the trams from overhead. It shoots through those steel cables that hang along the street from pole to pole. Look at the poles, Watson." He gestured with his stick.

Next to the two tracks, evenly placed poles were set along the right side of the street. On top of each pole hung an awning consisting of a wooden cantilever secured by bolts and braced by wooden slabs. A curved overhang protected anything beneath the awning from the London rain.

I peered at the intricacies of the bizarre scientific equipment. I'd never seen an electric tram system before.

A horse trotted past, pulling a buggy. *That is my preferred method of transportation,* I thought, *and much safer*.

Holmes pointed his stick to the mechanical parts hanging under the awning.

"You see that small wooden bar, Watson, bolted to the cantilever and hanging perpendicular to the tracks? And do you see that ceramic bar bolted to the wooden one?"

"Yes," I said slowly.

"Do you know why there's a ceramic bar there?"

"It has to do with conducting the electricity that powers the trams," I said, stating the obvious.

Holmes was deep in thought, however, and didn't acknowledge my comment. His explanation was as much for himself as for me.

"The ceramic bar insulates the electricity, protecting the wooden structure. Without insulation, the wooden bar, and indeed, the entire pole with its cantilever and braces, would go up in flames. Now—" He pointed again. "Do you see the metal bar attached to the other side of the ceramic one? Do you see the thin copper tube holding the cable wires?"

“Yes, Holmes, I see everything, though I admit that I don’t understand how it all works.” For a moment, we both stared at the mechanisms. Strangers passed us, shifting like shadows against the brown buildings.

Insects buzzed in the dry straw that straggled over the dirty windows.

Low over the city, dark clouds hung like clumps of mud.

And then from afar, a machine clattered, steel upon steel.

Holmes and I turned from the poles and the cable wires, and we stood, transfixed, as a small red-and-white tram rumbled around a corner. From two open windows, children waved and laughed, their mothers laughing with them, their fathers glowing with pride that they were among the first to afford such a fancy ride for their families. A conductor up front waved. The tram rumbled up the tracks toward us. Horses reared and backed away, their drivers scowling at the newfangled transportation system.

A long copper tube slanted upward from the top of the tram to a small copper U-shape that slid along the overhead electric cables. A steel spring bobbed at an angle between the copper tube and an upright bar on the tram’s roof.

Holmes beamed at me.

“Why, look at that!” he cried. “It’s marvelous! You see the spring, Watson? It provides pressure so the copper U always rubs against the bottom of the electric cables. The electricity moves along the cables and through the copper tube down to a motor inside the tram car. It’s wondrous!”

The little machine rumbled past us and then around a corner onto another street.

“Absolute genius,” Holmes muttered. “Now come, Watson, not a moment to waste. We must meet up with Willie Jacobs and then let him return to hiding.”

I hurried after Holmes, deeper into the residential section of town, where sludge burbled from the sewage grates. We were in Ripper territory, and my heart picked up pace. The Ripper had never been apprehended—no one knew if or when he might start killing again. I found myself peering into the shadows between the slum houses and heaps of garbage, certain I’d see the glow of a knife and an evil grin.

Holmes seemed unaware that we were in the part of town known for death. He strode ahead of me and turned onto Osborn Street. Nerves tingling, I followed.

A boy with a dirty face peered from the window of a tiny bloodstained building. A sign tacked to the door read, *MEAT*. Poor fellow. I wanted to stop, if only to offer a smile to the boy, but Holmes hooked a left onto Thrawl Street, and fearing I would lose him, I hurried on.

Finally, he stopped by a square building with a large door that reminded me of a portcullis made of solid metal.

"Here we are," he said, "Willie Jacobs's abode, where he keeps the amazing tram machine." Holmes rapped on the metal door while I mopped my forehead. He didn't seem at all tired from our trek through the East End.

The metal door creaked up, and Holmes ducked beneath it into darkness. Heart racing, I followed.

"Welcome to me dwelling, Mr. 'olmes, Dr. Watson." It was Willie Jacobs, his face illuminated by the glow of candles set into the walls. He wore the same filthy rags as last night, and he smelled just as bad. The poor fellow had been hiding all night, per Holmes's instructions. Using a pulley, he lowered the door.

"Have you eaten?" I asked. "I hope you found a suitable place to sleep, yes?"

Jacobs frowned. He started jabbing his nostrils again, and I shuddered.

"I slept with the rats," he said, "in the alley. I ate some trash."

"But you have money from the man who financed your father!" I exclaimed. "Why didn't you eat a decent meal?"

It was Holmes who answered.

"Because he was in hiding," he said brusquely. "Watson, we have little time. Inspector Lestrade or some other fellow from Scotland Yard might show up at any moment."

Jacobs shuffled his feet. His fingers jabbed more rapidly at his nose.

Something crackled overhead.

Startled, I peered at the high black ceiling, where sparks shot from the cables strung across the top of the machine. The ceiling had an odd geometry, sloping to the left and bulging to the right. I shook off a frisson of fear and let my gaze fall.

The machine was immense. It filled the cavernous room from one side to the other. It stretched to the ceiling, pile upon pile of limbs made from pipes and oddly shaped steel draped in cables. The whole mess thrummed, and as Holmes and I followed Jacobs toward the machine, it seemed to purr.

I could understand why Jacobs thought of the machine as a living beast. Even I, a doctor of science and medicine, grew cold in the presence of it. There was an eeriness to it, and against all logic, fear gripped my heart.

Jacobs and I stopped several yards away from the beast.

As for Holmes, he took a few more steps toward it, staring intently at it while avoiding the metal pipes rattling on the floor. I realized that the floor was shaking from the thrumming, *or breathing*, of the machine.

“Come,” Holmes said, waving at us to follow him. I nodded and carefully stepped over the snarls of wire. Grease clung to the air and caked my nostrils. Curiously, the machine reeked of garlic.

“Settle down,” Jacobs told it firmly.

The beast quivered. Pipes rattled. Fire sparked. The construction belched steam.

“Settle down,” Jacobs said again, his voice softer.

The beast hummed, and seemed to become more tranquil.

We approached a straw mat with blankets on it. An oil lamp flickered and smeared yellow stains across the floor.

“Tell me about your machine, Mr. Jacobs,” Holmes insisted, “and don’t omit anything, no matter how trivial you think it is.”

Jacobs twitched. His legs shook, and he sank back against my friend, who staggered and gently dislodged him, shifting Jacobs over to me. I recoiled at the smell and the dirt, but managed to hold on to the poor fellow.

“The beast,” he stammered, “it’s ne’er acted like this before. Me dad and me, we ’ad bolts poppin’ and pipes crackin’ o’er the years, but that was normal mechanical failure, and we was well equipped to deal with them problems. What’s goin’ on now, well, I ’ave no clue.”

“What do you mean? Are you saying that the machine has been malfunctioning?” Holmes asked.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this last night?”

“You didn’t ask.”

Holmes remained silent for a few seconds, then instructed the man to explain whatever he could about the working of the machine.

“These surroundings clearly upset you,” Holmes said. “Tell us what has been happening, and then we will get you out of here as quickly as possible.”

I steadied Jacobs’s shoulders, helping him to stand on his own.

“We’ll get you food, I promise, and a bath,” I said. “Whatever you need. You’ve been through an ordeal—but please, first do as Mr. Holmes says.”

Still shaking from his memories and his fears of police and Scotland Yard, Jacobs did as I instructed.

“You can see that the front joints are sealed, and nothin’s leakin’.” Jacobs pointed at the steel chains and cables dangling from both sides of the machine. Valves whisked open then eased shut. “The ’ydraulic pump, you see, she slides up and down on gum sandarac and fat. We feed phosphorus to the beast,” he said, and then added, “as food. You smell somethin’ like garlic? That’s the phosphorus.”

I nodded, although I didn’t understand the mechanics. My specialty was human biology and the treatment of disease. I glanced at Holmes, whose face conveyed nothing more than fascination. He was drinking it in, all of it, and later would remember every detail—every joint, every nail, screw, and bolt.

“Over ’ere,” Jacobs said, “by the pit.”

He drew himself up, stepped away from me, and tottered closer to the clanging machine. The three of us ducked under dangling cables around the right side to find a large hole in the midst of the tangled metal. Near the hole, steam hissed through pipes and liquid metal flickered.

“Twenty-eight rods connect the pistons to the crankshafts,” Jacobs said, as if this would make any sense to us. Metal wheels turned, gears meshed, belts vibrated, and cylinders sweated.

My mind flicked back to the *MEAT* building, where the boy had peered at me from the window. If Jacobs’s father had been the butcher in this section of town, the two of them would have lived there instead of in this building with the strange machine.

You have to count your blessings in this life, I mused, *and never forget that things could be worse. God help me, if I’d been raised like Jacobs, I probably wouldn’t have lived to be twenty-five*.

“Me childhood friend, Albert, woke one day to find ’e was a fool,” Jacobs said, as if it made sense. “Babblin’ like an idiot, Albert was. Before that day, ’e’d been as smart as me, maybe smarter. It ’appened to other people, too, around these parts.”

I wondered at this sudden turn in the discussion. Apparently, Holmes was as puzzled as I was.

“You think these mental changes had something to do with your machine?” he asked Jacobs.

“The beast, it knows what it does, and it—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Jacobs screamed and his hand flew to his mouth.

Something smashed against the ceiling. I jumped as metal shards rained to the floor, barely missing us.

And then the building *lurched*.

3

The machine heaved up, belched steam and grime, then crashed back down.

I stumbled, and pain shot down my leg. I must have twisted and sprained my left foot, as I couldn't put pressure on it.

Nails popped, cables snapped, steel lashed at the walls. A chain slammed against me, and I screamed, then it wrapped around my body and threw me across the floor toward a large hole in the middle of the tangled metal.

How could it have picked me up?

With my head hanging over the hole, I braced myself for the worst. The reek of phosphorus came near to making me vomit, and I gagged for breath. This had to be where Jacobs dumped the phosphorus, the "food" for the beast.

Beneath me in the pit, valves clanked open and shut, steam hissed through the pipes, and liquid metal sparked like lightning bugs. A white mist glowed, and *ghostly* it was, and it swirled up in fingers that nearly touched my face.

Another blast of garlic hit me, and I recoiled, forcing my body back a few inches. Everything on my left side hurt from my shoulder to my foot. If I didn't know better, I'd think the machine had been angered and wanted me dead. And yet it wasn't alive, so how could it want to kill me?

Holmes! Where is Holmes…

Slowly, I crawled toward the wall, tilting my body to keep most of my weight off my injured left side. Then I rose, bent at the waist, and hobbled beneath the steam pipes that snarled and beat each other like boxers.

Someone wrapped an arm around my waist—*Jacobs*— and steered me toward the door.

"Even in the dark," he said, "I know every inch o' this place. Me dad tol' me, 'Get to know it, son. The beast will be your only frien', your only companion, your only life.'"

Above us, fire sizzled and whipped, and for a moment, the walls were draped in white and orange light. Peering around for Holmes, I shrank back from the brightness, shielding my eyes with my arm, and I tripped over a softness—*small like a baby*—and squinted down at a bone.

I stooped and plucked up the bone, hard as steel now, almost spherical, its surface chiseled with numbers and symbols. It was just like the bone that

Willie Jacobs found after his father died, but this bone bore different symbols. I stashed it in my pocket, then glanced around frantically.

Holmes!

Holding up an arm to shield my eyes from the light, I peered to the left, then to the right.

Perhaps the beast has killed Holmes!

What was happening to me? I was thinking like Willie Jacobs.

"Holmes!" I shouted. "Where are you?"

"That's the third bone spit up by the beast since me dad died," Jacobs said feverishly, "and what any of them means I don't know. I give you one, I give me employer the second, and now you 'ave this one, too."

In a state of confusion, I staggered toward him.

A machine doesn't kill anyone, I told myself, *not on purpose. Men kill on purpose*.

At that moment, Holmes appeared from the rear of the clattering leviathan. He grabbed us both and pushed us toward the door. I was never so glad to see my friend as in that moment.

But it was then that the floor ruptured. It vomited rock, and I jumped, pain shooting down my injured leg. My ankle gave out, and I fell back against the wall just as the machine hurled a metal sheet at my head. Serrated on the edge, sharp as a razor—

I'd barely avoided decapitation.

A huge hydraulic pump banged up and down, a morbid growth with hemorrhoid arms, and its lesions and polyps burst in fireworks of pus. Molten drops burned my scalp and shoulders, my face, prompting me to move. I limped as quickly as I could, holding onto my two companions and steeling myself against the pain.

Almost to the door now, almost there…

But the machine blocked our way. Sprouting out of nowhere, it seemed, were massive new limbs—hoses, cables, pipes, axles, belts, wheels, cylinders connected in steel formations, yet I couldn't see from where they came.

"I tol' you, the beast," Jacobs screamed, "it's alive and it wants us dead! It's a killer, the beast!" Holmes seized the man by both shoulders and shook him, yelling above the thundering steel.

"It's not alive, you fool!" he shouted. "This is a natural malfunction, with natural cause!"

“It *is* alive, and the cause ain’t nothin’ natural!” Jacobs shrieked. “Me dad ne’er tol’ me what to do if the beast turned murderous.” He pointed. “I swear, I swear on me life, there was only twenty rods on them pistons only yesterday. Now there’s twenty-eight! I tell you, it’s growin’!”

He broke free from Holmes. With no one to help me walk, I doubled over in pain. Through the corner of my eye, I saw Jacobs, bathed in light when the machine flashed fire, cloaked in darkness when the fire subsided. His fingers groped the stone wall near his sleeping blankets.

The machine growled.

Its limbs quivered.

Darkness.

Holmes had his arm around me, pushing me toward the door.

“Come, Watson. We must get out of here, the quicker, the better.”

Light.

A flash of Jacobs’s face: insanity and glee. That’s when I saw the gold on the floor. Chunks like gravel, but glimmering and lustrous, definitely *gold*.

None of this made sense.

The machine gone wild.

The bones. The gold.

Holmes reached for the door pulley and cranked up the heavy door. As he did so, Jacobs scooped up the gold and dumped it into his pocket, then raced after us. The machine thrashed and strands of fire whipped around the room. The three of us staggered outside, and then Jacobs pulled the door down. Embedded into the wall by the door was a metal press-pad composed of numbers. I’d never seen such a thing.

From the other side, the machine screamed and banged. The door shook. I could sense the beast’s power, the steel straining against the walls, trying to break free and continue its attack. Tons and tons of steel…

“These numbers, they do what, lock the door somehow?” Holmes said.

Jacobs nodded, his eyes clouded with worry.

“What are the numbers?” Holmes demanded.

“Passed through the generations. I can’t tell you…”

“Tell me!” Holmes raised a fist to the man’s face.

“Let me go! I’ll do it.” Jacobs’s fingers shook as he pressed numbers on the metal pad in precise patterns—*300000 437 500 197 207 82 79 18 16*—and the lock clicked. It was astonishing.

“We must shut down that machine. It must be shut down permanently,” Holmes said.

“Ain’t no way to turn it off,” Jacobs said.

“What if you stop providing steam? No electricity, no phosphorus?”

“It won’t matter none. Once it’s runnin’, it don’t stop. Denyin’ it food only makes it angry, makes things worse.”

Holmes suddenly gasped.

“We must return to Whitechapel High Street, where the tram runs, where all the people are, at once!” Instantly I knew what he meant. “Go, run ahead, Mr. Jacobs,” he commanded, “and get everyone off the trams. Now!”

Jacobs raced ahead, while Holmes helped me limp back toward Osborn Street, and ultimately to Whitechapel High Street. My leg and foot hurt too much for me to hurry. I hobbled as best as I could. My physical injuries tormented me less than my mental anguish.

“How on earth could such a thing happen, Holmes?” I asked. “Could Jacobs have tampered with the machine so it appeared alive and wild?”

“No,” Holmes replied. “Jacobs wouldn’t know how. Besides, he’s not the type, nor is he the sort to kill his own father then seek help in finding the killer.”

“What, then?”

This time, Holmes didn’t answer. He steered me along, maintaining his silence, a deep frown on his forehead, lips pursed, eyes glowing.

Dizzy. I didn’t feel like myself. It was as if the world had blurred, as if cotton filled my brain, as if my thoughts were in tune with the dark clouds. I tried shaking my head, but it didn’t clear.

My ankle swelled as I walked, and my shoe felt tight. I ignored the pain. I was good at ignoring pain. I’d learned well during my stint in Afghanistan.

Holmes and I slipped under the tram wires and wooden poles, then we were by the fish store. Women pawed through sardines and haggled over bread. Hot tar bubbled on the pavement and stuck to my shoes. I had to yank them up, making my ankle hurt even more.

As we neared the tobacco shop, I thought I glimpsed Mary down the street near a cart stacked with what looked like liquor bottles. She waved and smiled, and my heart beat faster.

With Holmes at my side, I rushed toward the cart. Suddenly, life felt a little better. Mary was here.

But…

Why? Why would Mary come here? She knows how dangerous it is.

And where is Samuel?

I clutched Holmes's coat. We glanced at each other, and I could see the concern in his eyes. Yet despite my fear—and the sheer horror of the situation—people moved past as if in slow motion. My ears buzzed.

I shook my head, swallowed, blinked hard.

Nothing helped.

It can't be Mary.

Mary is safe at home.

The woman who looked like Mary turned, and I saw that she held a baby in one arm.

Samuel.

"Holmes?" I said.

"Steady, Watson," Holmes said.

Just then, a tram buzzed around the corner so fast that I barely saw the wheels, the steps, or the faces. The overhead wires sizzled—

Then people screamed.

Men rushed from buildings to see what was happening, and it was just like inside the building when the beast went wild, as the fire whipped against the liquor cart, which went up in flames. Time cracked from slow to fast and now slow again.

The tram tottered, its red-and-white paint melting in the fire, the wooden structure a bonfire, and then the whole blazing thing fell over. I froze in place, unable to grasp the enormity of what was happening. Three women and two children rolled from the tram, screaming, trying to bat the fire off their bodies.

Something struck the back of my head, and I cried out as my vision blurred. Grasping my head, I turned to see a fallen tram pole, and then neon light filled my eyes. I fought to retain my balance.

Willie Jacobs stood near the fire, his face white and his mouth open wide in horror.

A mother clawed at her small son. She wailed. Then her hands melted, and the child's face melted. All the bodies were still, skin and fat and organs aflame, and then…

Only bones.

All around me, a flurry of women gasped and slapped their hands over their mouths. Workmen beat down the flames with their coats. One dumped a bucket of water on the burning corpses, but the flames only roared higher.

The screams, oh, the screams, it was as if hell itself had crackled out of the spider-web wires and the cables and unleashed itself upon the city. I stumbled forward. My eyes burned from the ash, and no matter how much I blinked, I couldn't erase the neon from my vision.

My body shook.

I wanted to die.

Not them. Not my family, *not, not, not*…

I couldn't let myself think it.

Not, not, not… Yet there it was, the thought surfacing against my will. *Oh please, not Mary and Samuel. Oh please, let them be all right*.

Let me *die*. *Let* me *die instead*.

The pain blotted out anything I might have felt in my head, leg, or ankle. Physical sensations were nothing compared to the pain in my soul. It was as if my head had cracked open, split wide with an axe. It was as if Satan himself had driven a spike into my heart. It was as if God had died.

I saw blood, *blood everywhere*, and the soft flesh, and the filthy swaddling cloth.

Oh, no, not the baby.

Not the baby…

Hush, Samuel, Daddy won't let anything happen to you. As I sank to my knees, it played over and over like a bad song in my head. A woman's corpse lay in a pool of liquor, marinating in the fire.

I covered my eyes with my hands. I couldn't bear to look at her, couldn't bear to see the bones, the blood, the mush of what was left of her face and body.

Turning slightly, I peered through my tears at Holmes, who tossed off his top hat, stripped off his black coat, and slapped at the fire. But he couldn't put it out. He screamed and cursed and slapped at the fire until he slumped, exhausted, to the ground.

The woman burned until I saw the last wisp of flesh curl into the smoke and she was nothing but bones, black and charred upon the dirt of the street. Then I cried. I couldn't stop crying. Where was Samuel? Was he gone, too?

There he was. A baby was on top of the nearly-destroyed cart that had held liquor. He was so small, my heart seized up, oh so small, only the size

of a whiskey bottle. I reached for him, and the body fell into my arms. Two weeks old, and now dead. His face had melted, the flesh black on his bones. I cradled what was left of him in my arms.

Holmes lifted me and put an arm around my shoulder. Still I clutched Samuel to my heart. Holmes nodded to someone, and a woman with brown velvet eyes gently took the baby. Then Holmes draped a cloak over me to shield my eyes, and he coaxed me into a cab.

“Jacobs found three spherical bones, Watson, in addition to what remained of his father. Did you hear?”

Yes, I’d heard Willie Jacobs carrying on about the beast spitting out three spherical bones. The newspapers had reported that various numbers of the weird spheres were found near each body.

What did it all mean?

At the moment, it didn’t matter much to me.

“Take him,” Holmes said to someone.

“My f-family?” I whispered, but Holmes was already gone.

The cart bumped along the road. Spider-web wires sparked overhead. I slumped on a cushion the color of blood. My head throbbed. My eyes ached.

Then all went dark.

4

Voices flickered like shadows. Words tumbled around the room. Meaningless syllables. I didn't know the time nor where I was.

The words grew louder and more strident. As I came to my senses more fully I found that I was lying in a bed, and that three men were arguing nearby. I abandoned my nightmares and listened.

One voice had the accent of an educated man. He spoke quickly and with elegance, the words smooth and never rising in pitch. *Holmes*, I realized. The second man's voice was guttural and harsh, as if he smoked too much. The third voice was as cultured and educated as Holmes's, yet deeper, almost a baritone.

"I tell you, Willie Jacobs is to blame." It was the guttural voice. "I'm going to prosecute, and he'll spend the rest of his miserable life in jail!" A fist pounded what might be a table, and my eyes popped open.

"You will do nothing, Harold," Holmes said.

"That's Detective Bentley to you, Holmes."

"As you wish. *Detective* Bentley, you will do nothing to Mr. Jacobs."

"But it was murder. Manslaughter, at minimum."

"He bears no responsibility for these deaths. He himself just lost his father, his only family. Give the man time to heal."

Willie Jacobs would never heal. Of that I was certain.

I stared at the ceiling. Plaster swirls, painted angels, cherubs. Where was I? This wasn't Baker Street, nor was it the humble flat I shared with Mary and Samuel. Rolling to my left side, I buried my face in the pillow. A duck-feather mattress cradled my aching body. I pulled the blanket to my chin, and the cloth was softer than Samuel's cheek.

"We have to get to the bottom of this, Mr. Holmes. Too many people died, and God only knows how many are *going* to be killed. No one knows how the machine works. People are furious, and with good reason."

"You're right about that, Detective," Holmes said. "The machine must be shut down. As yet, however, no one knows it well enough to do so, but I assure you, sir, I will have an answer."

"Do you have *any* idea how the machine works, and how to fix it?" the third man said, the baritone.

“I do not yet know, Professor Fitzgerald,” Holmes said. I pictured his eyes, sharp and gray, and his steepled fingers with their tips upon the lower edge of his mouth. “Theodore Jacobs built it based on interpretations of drawings and symbols that his ancestors found on animal hide. It’s not a simple matter to decipher these symbols, but in time, I’m sure to make sense of them.” After a moment, he added, “Where are the drawings, Professor?”

“What makes you think I have them?” the baritone said.

“Come now, sir. We’re both intelligent men. You seemed not in the least bit surprised when I mentioned ancient drawings and symbols that enable a modern man to construct a powerful machine. You already knew about Jacobs and his machine and the drawings, didn’t you?”

A low chuckle.

“You have me, Mr. Holmes. Yes, Jacobs told me about the machine and his ancestors’ drawings.”

“And you financed his experiments?”

The other man was quiet.

This time, it was Holmes who chuckled.

“You’re obviously a wealthy man, Professor, with sufficient funds to finance the construction of such a machine. And after all those deaths, you still prefer to see it repaired, rather than destroyed.”

“I may have given the poor man some money, yes. I give to many, Mr. Holmes. I am a generous man—a man of morals and principles, as I’m sure you are. As for destroying the machine, if we use explosives, we risk killing many more. I know not how to turn off the machine, but it would be a far safer option.”

“And the ancient drawings, Professor Fitzgerald. Where are they?”

“I have them. They’re safe.”

“This talk is all fine and dandy,” Detective Bentley interjected, “but you understand, gentlemen, that I must put your man in jail until the public uproar dies down. He’ll have to stay there until we work this out, and between you and me, I think Willie Jacobs is guilty as sin.

“He knew the risks, he and his father,” the detective continued. “We talked to the father about this a while back. They knew there was no way to turn off the machine or monitor what it was doing. This was all some grand experiment gone wrong. It killed Theodore Jacobs, and now it’s responsible

for the deaths of many innocent citizens. Why did they do it? The answer is obvious—money. It always boils down to greed, doesn't it, Mr. Holmes?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Jacobs and his father didn't live in great luxury. They owned virtually nothing beyond their blankets and filthy clothes. I wonder, Professor, what did you pay them, and where did the money go?"

"I provided the resources needed for the construction, and paid them a fair—if modest—living wage. What they spent it on, or what they did with it, is not my concern. They lived in my machine house, as well, and for a very small rent, I might add."

At that, I thought about the gold nuggets Jacobs had scooped from the floor by the machine. I wondered if this was the wealth, the greed, that had motivated Jacobs and his father to build an experimental steam-powered tram in the poor part of town.

Instantly, I rejected the idea. Jacobs and his father slept on the floor of a filthy machine room and clearly didn't have the money for decent meals, baths, or fare for carriages.

If that was the case, though, then from where had the precious metal come? It was most confusing, and my head began to ache again.

"None of this is relevant," Bentley said, his voice adding to the pain. "Willie Jacobs is responsible for the tram deaths and for that machine. And I say he killed his father and needs to go to jail. That's what matters here."

"He did *not* kill his father," Holmes said firmly. "Besides, we need him. No one else has a clue how to shut down the machine."

I pulled myself to a sitting position and rubbed my eyes. I was anxious to find out how long I'd been unconscious. I was also anxious to help Holmes, but most important, to know what had become of Mary and Samuel.

Oddly, my cheeks were clean-shaven. I wore silk pajama tops and bottoms that were much too large for me. My skin smelled of pine-scented soap. I slid my feet to a red-and-white marble floor. The tiles were cool and arranged like a jigsaw puzzle into an elaborate pattern. My ankle was no longer swollen, just slightly purple from the injury.

I glanced around the room. There was a tapestry on the wall, a hunting scene with noblemen on horses. A damask chair that had to date back hundreds of years. By the chair was a pair of slippers, red plush with fur lining. Embroidered on the top of each slipper were the letters HF.

This must be Professor Fitzgerald's home, I thought.

Donning the slippers and a matching robe, I twisted the gold knob on the bedroom door, which opened slightly. For a moment, I stood transfixed. The door was six inches thick—solid wood inlaid with gold filigree and cherubs.

The room on the other side of the door was even more ornate. It smelled of leather and cigar smoke. Bottles of liquor glittered on immense wooden tables overlaid in gold filigree. Carved cabinets flanked the walls, and books, bottles, jars, and statues filled the shelves. Red-white marble columns stretched from the oriental rug to the ceiling. Then there were the paintings, clearly not portraits of anyone's ancestors nor of pastoral settings. Illustrated in rich colors that caught the light as if made from unknown substances, the subjects were multi-limbed, robed, and holding strange metal objects.

Stepping through the doorway, I almost knocked over a silver tray heaped with freshly cut twigs and leaves. Fumbling with it, I pushed it back on the table, another gilt-infused piece of furniture that looked as if it belonged in a king's palace five hundred years ago.

My actions attracted attention.

"Ah, Dr. Watson. Join us, will you?" Professor Henry Fitzgerald stood by a marble fireplace that reached to the ceiling. Given the recent events, I was glad to see that the fire was dead. Fitzgerald puffed on a slim cigar and trained his huge black eyes on me.

"Sit beside me, Watson. I take it you're feeling better?" Holmes smiled for a moment, then the expression vanished from his face. It was as warm a smile as one could get from him, and I was gratified. He gestured at a plush chair to his right.

"I'm glad to be awake again," I said.

Abruptly, the room went fuzzy. Weak, numb, I fell into the chair. Waves of dizziness flushed through me, and my stomach lurched.

Across the room the Professor lifted a plate of sweet cakes and waved it in my direction.

"Something to eat, perhaps?"

"No," I said. "Thank you."

"Brandy?"

A stiff drink might help.

"Whiskey will do," I answered.

Fitzgerald stuck his cigar in an ash tray and poured a glass of whiskey for me.

Harold Bentley perched on a chair that looked like a throne. He was a rumpled man. Graying whiskers, a tangle of brown hair, dark eyes set too close together. He wore wrinkled trousers, a stained shirt, and an orange tie.

Henry Fitzgerald handed me the whiskey, then returned to the fireplace and his cigar. He tilted his head and puffed a few rings of smoke toward a painting of a freakish creature holding a metal box with gears on it.

Bentley pulled a crooked cigarette from his shirt pocket, struck a match and sucked in smoke, then immediately started coughing. He didn't seem to care, however—he hacked, then smoked again. He was a nervous wreck. Why they kept a man this edgy on the police force was a wonder.

Given his record, it's downright absurd…

Professor Henry Fitzgerald was anything but nervous, and definitely not a wreck. In his mid-to-late thirties, he wore his hair tucked behind his ears and draped to his chin. It was clipped to perfection, not a strand out of place. His shoes were spotless, as if they were new. His shirt and trousers were both black knits, loose and comfortable, yet impeccable in their fit.

I lifted the glass to my lips, and the whiskey burned down my throat. A slight numbness spread through my arms and chest. It felt good.

Fitzgerald stared at Bentley, then spoke.

"You're wasting my time, Harold. Let's get down to the matter at hand or dispense with this little soirée, shall we?"

"Now come on," the detective protested. "Don't talk to me like that. I'm here on police business. Show some respect."

"This has nothing to do with respect. It has to do with murder. I believe there have been other occurrences. *Elsewhere*. I believe the murders are connected."

"And what makes you think that?" Holmes asked. "Is there another machine?"

"Where's Willie Jacobs?" I said to Holmes.

Holmes didn't look at me. Curtly, he answered, "He's missing, Watson. The police are on a manhunt at this very moment. Now tell me, Professor, where have these other killings occurred, and do you have evidence of another machine such as the one Willie Jacobs maintained?"

"None of which I'm aware," Fitzgerald replied. "I financed only the one, here in London.

“Two years ago,” he continued, “a colleague of mine, Dr. von Loome, called upon me in Avebury, where my ancestral home is located. He spoke of these mysterious drawings possessed by the Jacobs man, Willie’s father. I was intrigued.”

“Have there been any similar deaths in Avebury?” Holmes asked sharply.

“I don’t know. Possibly,” the Professor said. “People die all the time.”

“But there’s no experimental tram machine there?”

“None.”

Holmes persisted. “Then these other *possible* deaths you mention… they took place elsewhere? What do you know of them?”

Fitzgerald remained calm, despite the questioning.

“Nothing tangible, I’m afraid—just rumors,” he said. “People gossip in the pubs, and while I can’t verify what they say, I’ve heard talk of a criminal lunatic. Of people who have vanished as far away as the northern border and the eastern shore. Of bodies…”

I drank the rest of my whiskey.

“Where’s my family, Holmes?” I asked, the memories suddenly flashing back. “They died!” I cried. “They *died*, didn’t they, Holmes?”

“No. They’re safe, Watson,” he replied. “Following the… incident, I put them in a cab back to your flat. You had been knocked unconscious. Mrs. Hudson is keeping your wife apprised of your condition.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, shaking my head and immediately regretting it. “What was Mary doing in that part of town?”

He didn’t answer. I could see that something was bothering him.

“What is it?” I prompted. “What’s wrong? Is it Mary?”

“Mary is fine, as is Samuel,” he said. “We’ll speak later.” With that he turned away. Holmes was concealing information, and I didn’t know why. It was frustrating, but I knew better than to press him. So I changed the subject.

“How long have we been here?” I asked. “I assume this is Professor Fitzgerald’s home.” I managed to smile to our host, and he revealed that Holmes and I had been staying with him for the past day and a half, while I healed.

“My staff has cared for all of your needs,” he added. “The day before yesterday, I came upon the horrible scene in the marketplace, only to find Mr. Sherlock Holmes—ragged and exhausted—crouched in the street, soaked in blood. And you, sir, were in a terrible state. It seemed only right

that I should have my carriage bring you here, where my private physician Dr. Stoutgarteen could tend to you."

"This was most kind," I murmured. "Yes, I know of Dr. Stoutgarteen. He is most esteemed. Thank you."

Bentley hacked on cigarette smoke, hoisted himself from the chair, and tossed the spent cigarette into the fireplace.

"I must go, gentlemen," he said, the words rasping in his throat, "and help find this Willie Jacobs. He's done enough damage, by God. I don't want anyone else hurt." While I sensed a small amount of sincerity in his voice, I also suspected that catching Willie Jacobs would lead to a tidy reward, or perhaps a promotion.

Bentley was the sort of man you shared drinks with at the local pub. You beat him at darts. He beat you at billiards. And he wasn't very good at his job. We'd first encountered him when he refused to lock up Timmy Dorsey, a thug whose violent tendencies began in his teens.

By the time he was in his mid-twenties, Dorsey had turned a pastime into a profession. He'd steal a penny just so he could shove it down someone's throat for a laugh. Holmes had pinned several murders on the man, but Bentley claimed there wasn't enough evidence to lock him up, much less convict him.

I wondered when Inspector Lestrade would come on the scene and take this current case away from the bumbling detective, who really wasn't up to the task.

Fitzgerald pressed a button by the fireplace, and a bell sounded in the distance.

"Detective, please make sure everyone in the city avoids the trams," he said. "No one is to get on them or go near them. Send men out to cut any wires leading to the machine. Do you understand?" It seemed to me that he spoke as if to a child.

"Yes, I understand," Bentley growled. "I'll need to talk to you again, Professor. I'm not sure what you mean by these other killings… you said up north and to the east? But first things first." He glanced at Holmes, and then at me. "They can be dealt with after things settle down a bit here in my own jurisdiction."

A maid arrived to lead the detective from the house. She was young, maybe twenty, with a kind face, wearing a long black dress and a white

apron. Wisps of red hair peeked from beneath a black cap. Her eyes were soft, like brown velvet.

I remembered those eyes. This was the woman who had taken the dead baby from my arms, the baby I'd thought was Samuel.

She smiled at me, but I looked away.

The memory was too fresh.

5

"*More killings*," the Professor had said. I wondered how many more babies and mothers had died, how many elderly and children. Was Fitzgerald right? Was a criminal lunatic on the loose? Was Holmes wrong about the arcane spheres? Had a Ripper-like killer planted them?

My head reeled. I wanted to go back to the bed's soft blanket, but first I needed to ask the Professor and Holmes a few questions.

"Why would anyone kill so many people, seemingly at random?" I asked.

"There are no answers yet," Holmes said. "A trip to Avebury might be in order, though. For now, Watson, you must rest. I need you in your best condition."

"Before I can rest, Holmes, I must have some answers," I countered. "Beginning with Mary and Samuel. Why were they by that liquor cart? What could have possessed Mary to follow us?"

Holmes stared for a moment at Professor Fitzgerald.

"Promise me, Watson, that you'll remain calm."

Instantly, I felt anything *but* calm.

"What is it?" I demanded. "Tell me."

"Your wife had a visitor," Holmes answered. "He arrived after we left your flat."

"Who?"

"Here, look at this note, Watson." Holmes pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and thrust it at me. I rose, my legs shaking, and took the note from him. I sank back into my chair.

> Dearest love,
>
> Come quickly. I need you. I'm injured and can't be moved. Come immediately to Randolph's Cigars and Fine Liquors on Whitechapel High Street. Don't hesitate for any reason.
>
> Your loving husband,
>
> John

"But I didn't send this!" I exclaimed. "What is it?"

"Do you recognize the handwriting?" Holmes asked.

I stared at the lettering. It resembled my handwriting, but it missed the mark ever so slightly. I wondered if even Mary would know the difference.

"It's very similar to mine," I said. "Who forged it and for what purpose?"

Holmes plucked the note from my hand, studied it for a moment, then tucked it back into his pocket. Fitzgerald sat quietly the whole time, but his eyes darted to Holmes, and I could tell he was keenly interested.

"Apparently, a carriage followed us to your flat," my friend said. "Some time after we left, the driver gave this note to your wife. Thinking you had written it, she grabbed the baby and immediately left with the driver. He took her to Randolph's Cigars and Fine Liquors. She did all of this because she thought that you needed her. She never would have gone there otherwise. When the tram caught fire, she raced off with Samuel. A policeman later brought her to my attention. I sent her home."

A chill swept down me, and I began to shake.

"But *who* wrote the note, Holmes? *Who* was the driver?"

Holmes frowned. Finally, he spoke.

"I recognize the writing, Watson, disguised as it is to closely resemble your own. He came to *your* home and to *your* wife. He brought her to a part of town where four people have just been murdered and where she and your son might have been harmed or even killed. Yet she fared well and was not injured, despite the magnitude of danger. I believe her presence there was orchestrated to send us a message."

"But what message, Holmes?" My head throbbed. "Tell me!"

"This man doesn't want you working with me again—not on this case. Had we not seen her, the message would have been the same once we learned of the note and her excursion. He deduced that I would be in that area, however, for he is clever and perhaps glimpsed our visitor, Willie Jacobs, the other night. This is a warning, Watson, that if you continue to work with me, your wife and baby…"

He didn't have to finish. I knew what he meant.

Professor Fitzgerald stirred in his chair by the fireplace.

"And who is this forger, Mr. Holmes?" he asked. It seemed as if he might already know the answer, but I still hadn't a ghost of a clue.

"There is only one man I know who would pit himself against me in such a vile way," Holmes said, his voice cold. "One man who could forge handwriting so well that even your wife could not tell. That man is Professor Moriarty."

“What?” I exclaimed. “No, it can’t be!”

Holmes had mentioned Moriarty to me, and I knew he considered the Professor a most dangerous adversary—his rival in both skill and intellect.

“Yes,” Holmes said now, “it can be and it is.”

Abruptly, Fitzgerald jumped from his chair. Beaming, he rang for the maid, and then swiveled back to face us.

“So this is progress, eh, Mr. Holmes?” he said, strangely ebullient. “This Moriarty is a criminal mastermind, then. He must be behind the murders.” He turned to me. “As for you, Dr. Watson, perhaps you are indeed better off staying home and protecting your family.”

Fitzgerald’s reaction was odd, to say the least. Even so, he made a good point. Certainly I couldn’t let anything happen to Mary and Samuel. The tram fire incident had been terrifying enough, even before it emerged that a criminal mastermind had successfully taken Mary and Samuel under false pretenses. A man whose skills had earned him the respect of Sherlock Holmes.

Fear gripped me such that it made my mind reel.

The mother and baby who burned to death… they could have been Mary and Samuel.

“Holmes,” I said softly, “how can I continue?”

This time, his answer was swift.

“You *must*,” he said. “You have no choice. We must stop this killer, and for that to occur, I shall need your help, Watson. I trust you as I trust no other, and due to the bizarre nature of these murders, I may need your medical insight, as well. I may even need you to divert attention while I seek clues. I’ll get Lestrade to put a police guard outside your home. They’ll protect your family, night and day.

“I promise,” he added.

At that moment, the maid entered. Holmes flicked his fingers, gesturing at her to help me back to the bedroom. Fitzgerald nodded.

“Yes, please help Dr. Watson back to bed.” He turned to me. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, my man,” he said. “Go get some rest.”

Nodding, I rose, my legs shaking. With the help of Holmes and the maid, I stumbled back through the doorway and to the bed. She tucked me beneath the blanket, and I sank back to sleep.

*

Later, the red-headed maid propped me up in bed and spooned beef hash and potatoes into my mouth.

The food made me drowsy again, and as soon as she left, sleep took me—this time into a nightmare vista, a constant replaying of the fire. Samuel was there, limp, with drops of blood falling from his tiny, dead face. Over and over, the image played, the wrinkled little face, the eyes glazed, the little hands utterly still.

The image loomed, bigger and bigger.

Samuel, dead, *and it was all my fault*.

I sat up, drenched in sweat, and clasped my chest as if this might reduce the pain, but it didn't. I slicked the hair from my eyes. My body was cold, and I started shivering violently. I must have called out, for the maid entered.

"You've had a nightmare, sir. You're sweating." She leaned over and wiped my forehead with a soft cloth.

"Yes, yes, I'm so very sorry." I had to gather my wits. I'd be of no use to Holmes or my family this way.

Death had never affected me quite this much. I was used to the dying, and to death. Yet this time it hit me much harder. This time, it involved Mary and Samuel.

But they hadn't died.

Had they?

No, and I had to shake loose these nightmares. Return to myself, strong and calm.

The maid cleared her throat, hesitated, and then spoke.

"I'm sorry, sir, but there's a man here," she said. "Mr. Holmes is with him, and he insists that you come. He needs you, he says."

"Who's here?" I sputtered. "Is it Lestrade?" She just shrugged, and I said, "Please, get cold water for my face, and I want my own clothes. Some bread, please, and my cigarettes and a small whiskey."

6

Feeling more like myself again, I returned to Fitzgerald's lavish sitting room, carrying the glass of whiskey. Logs crackled in the fireplace, and an eerie light spun around the room. There was an odd scent of the outdoors, as if I were in a pine forest with decaying leaves and mulch underfoot.

How peculiar, I thought, to be in the center of London, one of the most advanced cities in the world, and yet have the sense of being *elsewhere*. I had to squint a few times to adjust my vision to the faint shudders of light.

As before, three other men were in the room—Professor Henry Fitzgerald, Holmes, and a gaunt fellow whom I didn't recognize. Holmes stood up as I entered the room, clasped my hand, and led me to a chair adorned with carvings of beasts that I couldn't identify. Unlike the multi-limbed creatures in the paintings, these were beasts of the ocean, for they possessed all manner of fins, fishtails, and jelly-like tendrils. One looked like a sphere of coral with two flat eyes and a blowhole. Another like a whale that had grown tentacles on its head and at the base of its tail.

The carved beasts seemed almost alive, as if they *pulsed* on the arms of my chair. I stared at them for what must have been too long, for when I broke free and looked at Holmes, he narrowed his eyes as if he were assessing my state of mind. Abruptly, he flashed a smile at me, and his eyes widened.

"You have awakened, Dr. Watson," he said. "Excellent— you look much better than when you left us. Please, make yourself comfortable, and let me introduce Mr. Kristoffer Beiler, who claims that his father was murdered by a chair." My friend's words betrayed no irony.

He was quite serious.

Looking down, I was gripped by sudden anxiousness, and moved to rise, my eyes riveted again to the arms of the chair. But Holmes laid a steady hand on my shoulder and nudged me back down.

It's just my imagination, I thought, taking a deep breath. *I shan't let it run away with me*.

"Remain calm," Holmes said, as if reading my thoughts. "Your nerves are jittery, dear fellow. You must still be recovering from the tram incident. I assure you the furniture in this room has no murderous intent. The chair

that killed Amos Beiler—if we are to believe the account—was of a… *particular* nature."

I clasped my hands on my lap, holding them tight so Holmes would not see them shaking. Steadying my nerves, I focused carefully. The sensation had passed. The pulsing had ceased.

"Watson?"

I managed a smile. "I'm fine, Holmes," I said, turning my attention to the visitor who was squirming in the chair vacated earlier by Harold Bentley. He held a glass in one hand.

"Mr.…" I started, then paused, for this was no grown man. Rather, this was a youth, perhaps fifteen years old. But as I didn't want to insult him at our first meeting, I continued as I'd started. "Mr. Beiler, I'm delighted to make your acquaintance." I stood and bowed slightly. He nodded, and his eyes met mine. Briefly, I shook his free hand, then sat again.

Beiler wore a lumpy black hat that perched on the back of his head. When he spoke, it was with a high-pitched twang.

"I've been anxious for you to hear my story," the young man said. "You were knocked out?"

Holmes glanced in my direction, raised his eyebrows, and shrugged, indicating that he wanted me to answer the boy.

"I was knocked out, yes," I said, "but not for long."

Before the boy could answer, Henry Fitzgerald spoke up.

"Please continue with your account, young man," he said, waving a cigarette. "You claimed that a… a *chair* killed your father, Amos Beiler, did you not?" He shot us a look that combined amusement with scorn. "That seems highly unlikely—might it have been an hallucination? Perhaps you should tell us exactly what you *think* you saw.

"If you continue to assert that a piece of furniture committed the act, well, then perhaps we can acquire some help for you," he continued, his tone annoyingly placating. "We have some good local facilities, the Whitechapel Lunatic Asylum, for example." Fitzgerald leaned against the fireplace and flicked ashes on the logs.

The boy gulped liquid from the gold-embossed glass and returned it to an ornately carved side table that stood between us. He appeared to be agitated, but kept it under control.

"I don't need an asylum, Professor, no I do not," he said. "I saw what I saw, and I'd swear to it."

“Please, let us proceed with open minds,” Holmes said, gesturing for Fitzgerald to remain silent. “Pray tell us what you perceived, Kristoffer, and we shall respect what you tell us.”

Kristoffer Beiler nodded at Holmes as if in thanks, then hitched up trousers sewed from rough black cloth, and snapped his braces. At the top of each strap, three yellow cat heads bared sharp teeth. This was a puzzling sort of ornamentation, one I’d never seen before.

“Please tell us what happened, young man,” I said, taking a sip of the whiskey. “I promise, neither Holmes nor I will judge you.”

My friend turned his head away from the boy, who seemed not to notice. He puffed on his pipe, waiting, and the smoke curled into the ghostly light emanating from the fireplace.

When Kristoffer remained silent, collecting his thoughts or perhaps his courage, Holmes put down the pipe, steepled his fingers, and leaned forward. The boy had his full attention.

“Let me help you get started, Kristoffer,” he said softly. “You are descended from the finest furniture makers near Shropshire.”

“How can you guess so much from some small talk?” I asked, astounded.

Holmes beamed.

“Look at his braces, Dr. Watson.”

Kristoffer Beiler’s cheeks flushed. He touched the yellow cat heads.

“Those are loggerheads, are they not?” Holmes asked.

“Yes, loggerheads,” the young man answered, “though I wonder how you know.” His eyes were wide.

“The leopards’ faces are called loggerheads, which are the unofficial symbols of south Shropshire, are they not?”

Kristoffer nodded.

“This is common knowledge,” Holmes said.

Common knowledge if you happen to be Sherlock Holmes, I thought. I cleared my throat.

“Bravo!” Fitzgerald exclaimed. “Pray continue, Mr. Holmes.”

“Happy to oblige, Professor. Young Kristoffer has said that he is a furniture maker, and I hazard the guess that he is quite the craftsman.” Holmes addressed the boy again. “Your father, as well as his father before him, were also the makers of fine furniture. Your family probably obtained wood from the Clun Forest region, though perhaps now, you obtain it from other forests.”

“And tell us how you deduce these facts, Mr. Holmes.” Fitzgerald had returned to the chair he’d occupied when Harold Bentley was present. He seemed highly amused by Holmes’s deductions. His large black eyes glowed. The corners of his mouth curved upward. He casually crossed his legs and leaned back on the plump upholstery.

“It’s elementary.” Holmes pointed at Kristoffer’s boots, which were scuffed and cracked. “Clearly, you are a workman. Sawdust is caked in the cracks of your boots. In fact, sawdust is thick on the top of your boots where your feet join your ankles. In addition—” Holmes gestured at the boy’s hands “—your skin is tough, like hide, and stained brown. That’s wood stain, Watson.” The boy squirmed, seeming uncomfortable at being the center of so much attention.

“I see.” I sipped my whiskey, trying to look nonchalant.

“Marvelous! Bravo!” Fitzgerald cried.

Holmes frowned at him, then at me.

“You, Dr. Watson, should already know these facts, as they require only the simplest of deductions. Tell me, have you noticed the slivers of wood embedded in Kristoffer’s palms?”

“Why, no, Holmes,” I said, “how could I? The room is too dark.”

Kristoffer Beiler turned his hands over and stared at his palms.

“You are right, sir,” he said to Holmes, whose sharp eyes bored into me.

“Really, Watson, I know you’re not well, but think, man, *think*. I noticed the wood slivers when I shook Kristoffer’s hand. You shook the very same hand, and yet…” He reflected for a moment, then continued, “In all fairness, I’ve known for a long time that some of England’s finest chairs have been crafted from coppiced ash obtained in Shropshire’s old Clun Forest. No doubt, Amos Beiler’s hands were rougher than his son’s—probably as tough as elephant hide.”

At that, tears sprung into Kristoffer’s eyes.

“Please,” the boy said, and his voice cracked, “that is enough, Mr. Holmes. I can barely stand to remember…”

“I am sorry,” Holmes said, his voice softening, “but we must face what has happened, mustn’t we?” The boy flinched, and Holmes lowered his voice yet more.

“No doubt you’re reeling from the loss of your father,” he continued. “His death… his *murder*. We can’t bring him back, but we can find his killer, and this may bring you some peace. Shall we proceed to the reason

for your visit, then, so I may help you discover who committed the heinous act?”

Kristoffer Beiler swallowed hard, and nodded.

“Yes. I came because of my father. Murdered, as you say, but I *know* who did it. My father was murdered by his own handiwork. Ripped to shreds, he was. It sounds crazy, I know it does, but I am sure of what I tell you.”

Kristoffer was far more composed than I might have been in his position. Whatever had occurred, his father was dead—that fact was inescapable. For all we knew, the boy was an orphan. He was upset but calm enough. Perhaps accustomed to hard times.

Gently, I squeezed his arm, urging him to continue.

“My father was working in the barn, the *special* barn, on the chair of no dimensions, as he liked to call it. It was the special Beiler chair, one that would make us famous as the finest furniture makers in all England. We are closer to Avebury now, by the by, than to Shropshire itself.

“*Well*. I was in the barn with my father, who was singing his terrible songs. I left for the house, where I fell asleep, and when I returned later, my father…” Kristoffer broke off and wiped his nose on a sleeve, reminding me of Willie Jacobs.

Holmes leaned forward, elbows on his knees, gray eyes riveted to the boy.

“Every detail matters,” he said. “Please go on.”

“Well, my father was singing last I saw him, and the next, he was gone.”

“Singing terrible songs, was he? And right before the… incident. Interesting,” Holmes said quietly, and then abruptly, “But what do you mean, *gone*? Did you see his body, his corpse? And tell me about these songs. What makes them terrible?”

The boy cringed, then burst out crying. So much for his composure, I thought. He’d been holding back tears, braving it like a man. I had lost my own father as a young lad. He’d died in the war between British India and Bhutan. My mother died of grief and consumption shortly thereafter. Like Kristoffer Beiler, after my father died, I tried to be strong, but late at night when nobody could hear me, I’d shed a few tears, too.

I remembered now the relief those tears had brought. When my mother died, I didn’t even try to be strong. No, I just wept openly when I came home and found her on the kitchen floor. I grew tougher, though, and

quickly, and never spoke of my family. It was too painful. I preferred to think about today and tomorrow.

Now, as a man, it was easier to hold my emotions in check and stifle bad memories. As quickly as unpleasant memories came to mind, I could dismiss them. Someday, young Kristoffer would be able to do the same.

I gave the boy a square of cloth from my pocket, and he wiped his nose again, muttering a thank you. Then he continued speaking.

"As I returned to the house that night, leaving my father alone in the barn, the sky was shivering and glaring and some rain was falling. There was a violent storm. My father was singing, yes, but not any song you would know. He was shrieking horrible things."

"As if in pain?" I asked.

"No, sir. He was shrieking in the elder language, streams of garbled syllables in patterns. Not in pain. In glee, but horrible things, you see."

"Such as?" I prompted.

"The usual, Dr. Watson. *Ebb'yuh dissoth'nknpflknghreet*. That type of shrieking, but like a madman who thinks he's seeing God or the heavens or something, you see?"

Across the room, Fitzgerald flinched.

"Surely, you jest," he said sourly. "Or you lie."

"No, sir, I do not," Kristoffer said quickly. "I didn't sleep much. The storm woke me. It was still night, and I hastened back to the barn to get my father and urge him to get some sleep, as well. But he was already murdered, sirs. All I found of him was bones stacked all unnatural. The bones, they should have fallen, stacked as they were, but they sat there, all heaped everywhere and sticking out in all directions. And then there was this round bone, too, and it was all knifed, you see, carved, whittled, with wee pictures I don't know. And my father, his blood, his innards, his brains… he was all scattered everywhere in the barn!"

"Did you see any weapons near your father?" Holmes asked.

"No."

"Tools that could have been used to kill him in such a manner?"

"My great-grandfather's plank saw was by a stack of bones."

"Was there blood on it?"

"No."

"Any other tools nearby?"

“Of course,” the boy said. “On my father’s work bench and on the floor were a two-man coachmaker’s saw, a farm saw, a tang, a mortise chisel, jigger, shaving block. All sorts of hammers. A burl mallet, carpenter’s mallet, veneer hammer.”

“Axes?”

The boy nodded.

“Of course. All sorts. Mortise axes, chisel axes.”

“So everything was in its place, as you might expect to find all of your father’s tools?” Holmes asked.

“Nothing moved. Nothing missing.”

“No blood on any of the tools?”

“None.”

“I’m sorry to ask this,” I said, “but are you certain that what you saw—the gore, the innards, the bones, and the rest—are you *certain*, Kristoffer, that this was your father?”

“Excellent question, Watson!” Holmes exclaimed.

A surge of pride swept through me, but it was quickly replaced by shame, for I was in the presence of the victim’s son, and pride had no place here. Holmes’s face fell, as well.

After a brief hesitation, the boy answered.

“I am certain that it was my father, yes. His clothes were shredded but intact enough. His braces with the loggerheads… his hair—which was an odd color of copper, bright and shiny like the metal itself—his hair was slung by the wall, all limplike, tattered and torn. His wedding ring was on…” The boy lowered his head, and the rest of his words were muffled. “The wedding ring, a special one only he and my ma had, serpents and eyes on them, loggerheads carved on the inner curves… the ring was on… was on… was on my father’s brains.”

How awful, I thought. Who would do such a heinous thing, and *why*? *Only a monster*, I thought, *only a monster*. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something odd.

Fitzgerald’s hands had started twitching. He dropped his cigarette and quickly stamped it out, leaving a burned mess in the fine Persian rug. He seemed not to care whether it did permanent damage.

Holmes hammered on.

“Was the air heavy in the barn?”

“No.”

“Was the air unusually hot or cold?”

“No.”

“Did you see odd shadows that appeared unnatural in any way?”

“No.”

“Did your father have any enemies?” Holmes continued.

“We Beilers are cursed,” the boy said bitterly. “We have no friends, only enemies. People avoid us like we don’t exist. We’ve been cursed down the generations. Forever.”

“Why is this?” Holmes asked.

“Because of the chanting, the loggerheads, the ways of the Beilers. Mennonites were my ancestors, Mr. Holmes. We were few long ago, and most people assumed we were stamped out. For generations, we hid to avoid persecution, and still, we don’t make ourselves known, but for different reasons now. Beilers have drawings, etched on bones hundreds of years ago by my ancestors. Passed down from father to son.

“We follow the instructions,” he continued, “the drawings. We know not why they work as they do, but they produce chairs and tables and even barns of finest dimension, *special*, like no other. My father made the cherry divan of special dimensions for Lord Wiltshram, and he made a table for Lord Ashberton. No one else could’ve done it.”

I didn’t understand. Why would people be so afraid of furniture and other constructions that they would shun an entire family for generations? Holmes looked equally perplexed.

“What exactly scares people about the things you make, Kristoffer?”

The boy hesitated before answering.

“They aren’t of this world, these things.” He uttered the words slowly and so quietly I barely heard them. Then his eyes rose to mine, and they were glazed and hard as if he’d entered some sort of trance. Fine tremors swept through his body like soft waves in the sea.

Was it drugs, or a toxic substance? Family dementia? Never had I seen a person switch so rapidly into what might be perceived as a psychotic state.

Holmes barked a laugh and jumped to his feet. His eyes flashed, and he snapped his fingers a mere inch from the boy’s face.

“Control yourself, Mr. Beiler!” he said. “There is nothing that is *not* of this world.”

The boy blinked, and his eyes warmed again. He swept the black hair from his forehead, and I could see sweat glistening there. He removed the

lumpy black hat from his head and fanned himself with it. His body still trembled.

Holmes returned to his seat.

“I have only a few more questions,” he said in a reassuring tone. “It will be done soon. Now, is there a machine near the barn, something made of metal—perhaps with gears, cables, and pipes?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you find any marks outside the barn? Wheel tracks in the mud, for example, or footprints you didn’t recognize?”

“I saw nothing, Mr. Holmes, but I didn’t look.”

For a moment, Holmes was silent. Fitzgerald studied them both, and a slight smile appeared on his face.

“Where is your father now?” Holmes asked.

“The police forced me to bury him, what was left of him, that is.”

“Where?”

“In a nether corner of the Avebury cemetery. Unmarked grave, they told me. No coffin. Nothing. They wouldn’t allow anything. They gave him no dignity.”

“What did you bury? Everything? Bones, brains, all of it?”

A pause. Then quietly:

“Yes.”

“One more thing,” Holmes said. “Was your father a strong man?”

At this, the boy’s eyes lit up. “He was, indeed, Mr. Holmes. Six foot five and stronger than any fighter I ever known.”

“I see…” Holmes’s voice drifted off.

Professor Fitzgerald remained oddly quiet throughout Holmes’s interview of Kristoffer Beiler. As the room grew silent except for the crackling of the logs, and as the shadows stretched and the light thinned, the man said nothing—just smoked another cigarette, letting the stub burn down to his fingers. The haze was thick with the sweetness of Holmes’s pipe and the stench of the Professor’s tobacco, overwhelming the pine and mulch scent I’d noticed earlier.

Fitzgerald saw me staring at him. He smiled and pulled the bell string by his seat.

“I believe our young visitor is in need of food and drink, Dr. Watson, wouldn’t you say?”

“We have no time for pleasantries,” Holmes said.

“Holmes,” I said, “the boy is clearly famished and in poor condition.”

“I wouldn’t mind eating something,” Kristoffer piped up.

The maid entered, and Fitzgerald requested sandwiches, cake, and tea—then, as an afterthought, brandy. She left and we all sat quietly, lost in our own thoughts, as we waited for her to return.

Kristoffer began humming, and it was an odd melody. A *tuneless* tune, if such a thing could exist. As quickly as he began humming, the sound mutated, and he started to sing, except his words were of no language I’d ever heard. It was sheer gibberish.

Trembling, he seemed to become oblivious to his surroundings, and his high-pitched twang soared into octaves no human voice should be able to hit. It skidded across notes so high they didn’t exist on any musical instrument I’d ever heard.

“*Ch’thgalhn fhtagn urre’h nyogthluh’eeh ngh syh’kyuh yuh. Ch’thgalhn fhtagn urre’h nyogthluh’eeh ngh syh’kyuhyuh*.”

Without warning, Fitzgerald stiffened.

“Stop it! Stop it!” he cried.

Kristoffer stopped in mid-garble. The Professor raced to the boy and shoved him, hard, against the back of the chair.

“What’s the matter with you that you would sing such a song in my house?” he demanded, his voice low and threatening.

“Now just a minute—” I started to say.

“Get your hands off me!” Kristoffer pushed Fitzgerald away, and the man stumbled and nearly fell. The boy leapt up, angry, no longer trembling at all. His eyes were hard and glazed again.

Holmes and I exchanged a glance. Was this boy capable of aggression, violence, even *murder*?

“Was I singing *it*?” Kristoffer said. “Do you know *it*, Professor? *Do you?*”

Fitzgerald sank into his chair and went limp, his arms splayed over the arms of the chair, while his legs spread widely.

“It,” he muttered. “Do I know *it*? Why, that’s rich!”

He burst out laughing. At that moment, the maid returned with a tray and set it on the table between Holmes and the Professor, both of whom ignored her. She bowed and hurried away. Nobody touched the food and drink.

“It’s time for our young guest to get some sleep,” Fitzgerald said abruptly. “Take some sandwiches and cake, boy. Stay here tonight. We’ll

give you a room, and we'll get you back to Avebury in the morning. Come along." He reached for the boy, who flinched at first. Then the Professor hoisted Kristoffer up and escorted him down the hall in the direction the maid had gone.

The food remained untouched upon the table.

"Rather an abrupt departure, wouldn't you say?" Holmes muttered. "The Professor didn't even stop to let the boy take the very food he offered. Tell me, what do you make of all of this, Watson?"

"I can't say that the evening's entertainment—even with a musical score—was terribly uplifting, or even remotely pleasant. It was intriguing, though."

Holmes chuckled.

"And the murder of Beiler's father?"

"That makes no sense at all. Somehow, the killer got into the barn and murdered a man without leaving any trace of himself. Although," I added, "gaining entry likely would have been simple, I suppose, and the killer might have brought his own weapons, then left with them."

"Motive?"

"Anything, Holmes. Another maker of fine furniture who wanted to kill his competition. Maybe a dispute over payment. Or jealousy… perhaps Beiler's father had an affair with another man's wife. Certainly there seems to be anger enough directed at the family."

Holmes tucked his now-cold pipe into his pocket, and stood.

"Perhaps an ordinary motive was at play," he said, "but I think not."

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"An ordinary motive doesn't explain hacking a man to pieces, heaping his organs around the room, and stacking his bones in strange ways. And let us not overlook the spherical bones with the symbols, not to mention the odd songs of the evening and Professor Fitzgerald's reaction. This case is anything but ordinary, Watson."

Holmes's points made sense, as usual. Why would a maker of chairs murder a competitor in such a deranged fashion? And while a jealous husband might conceivably hack a man to death, it would be a crime of passion. He wouldn't heap the gore in exotic ways.

And then there were the spherical bones—a tangible link to the case of Willie Jacobs. That sent a tremor through my body. No, Holmes was right. We were up against something in which the motive was, as yet, entirely

unknown. Despite all of the previous cases we'd investigated together, we'd yet to encounter anything like this one.

At that moment, I was anxious to return to Mary and Samuel, and I was also tired and still felt weak. As I stood and straightened my jacket, to my surprise, Holmes threw himself onto the rug and began digging through the fibers under Kristoffer's chair.

"What are you doing?" I exclaimed.

"Ha!" Holmes exclaimed jubilantly as he plucked something from the rug and jumped up. Between his forefinger and thumb was a fragment of what appeared to be yellow parchment.

"I knew it!" he cried. "I saw something fall from the boy's pocket as he left with Fitzgerald. It was small and the room is dark, but I saw something fall, Watson, and here it is."

While Holmes examined his great find, this piece of parchment, I gathered my walking stick, overcoat, and other personal items.

"It is not paper, Watson," he said, tucking it into the pocket of his jacket. "No, it is ancient animal hide, and upon this scrap of ancient hide is a stroke of ink or some other stain—possibly blood. The lab will prove me correct.

"And now, we shall take our leave." He retrieved his own coat. "Come." He moved to the door, and I followed my friend into the night, where we clambered into a carriage.

"There must be some connection, Watson," he said, as he took a seat. "Perhaps Theodore Jacobs and Amos Beiler were being punished for crimes committed against a common enemy—but who could that be? There must be a connection between the two murdered men. Nothing else makes sense. The murders are so similar. Just who, or *what*, had these men offended?"

But I was fatigued and already dozing off. "Tomorrow," I murmured, "we'll talk about it again tomorrow."

As the carriage bumped along, a tuneless high-pitched song ran through my mind. The rhythm wasn't four-four or three-four, or any other known musical beat. Oddly, the song and its garbled syllables felt natural to me. I felt comforted, and fell asleep with what was now a beautiful song playing over and over in the backdrop of my dreams.

Ch'thgalhn fhtagn urre'h nyogthluh'eeh ngh syh'kyuhyuh.

7

I dashed from the carriage toward the building. The rain was fierce now, pellets battering me, and I pulled my hat low over my forehead to protect my eyes.

As I reached for the doorknob, I remembered Lestrade's promise to protect my family, and I peered over my shoulder. The gas lamps illuminated the rain and heavy fog. If the police were hiding in the dark, watching, I could not tell. Yet I *needed* to know, and so I stood there, cold and wet, peering into the night, until *there*… just to the right of the building across from mine, in the narrow space beneath the overhang…

I saw the dim outline of a man. Umbrella, long coat. Hopefully, he was a policeman and not a criminal hellbent on hurting Mary and Samuel. If indeed the shadowy object I saw was even a man.

Vaguely reassured, I twisted the knob and stepped quickly inside. It was blissfully warm. I bounded up the short flight of stairs to my flat. The sitting room was dark. Light juddered in the hall by the bedroom.

I wanted to tell Mary that I was home. I wanted to clasp Samuel close. But I trod softly and didn't wake them.

Happiness welled up, such as I never felt in any other circumstances. Not when I was with Sherlock Holmes. Not on the hunt for madmen far away in the remote corners of our great country. No, only when reunited with my family.

In the bedroom, the fire simmered on blackened logs. Strands of light curled up the walls and across the ceiling. There in the tiny bed a soft orange played across the baby's face. I stroked his fat fingers and cheeks, and for a moment, he stirred.

Slipping into the dressing room, I donned my nightclothes, and then, as quietly as I could, slid beneath the covers beside my wife. Her golden hair was soft and smelled of lemons. I felt her heartbeat. Content, I began to sink into sleep.

Then as a sapling takes root, a song dug its way into my mind and took hold. It was a popular song, "Little Annie Rooney" by Michael Nolan. At first, I thought, *How delightful*, and hoped it would lull me to sleep. But then something was off about the song. It was as if a vine had caught hold of a sapling, and tried to strangle it.

The melody was in E-minor with its F-sharp, rather than the typical E-flat major with its E, B, and A flats. I recognized the key because I'd listened to Holmes play his violin hour upon hour, and I'd endured his lengthy dissertations about music theory.

The lyrics were mostly intact, but here and there sprinkled with words I'd never heard, could not utter even if I'd tried. Even in my semi-lucid state, I knew that no man could possibly pronounce what I heard in my mind.

She's my *syh'kyuhyuh*,
I'm her *urre'h*.
Soon we'll die ne'er to part.

It was a bizarre fusion, human and inhuman.

She tried to warn me, tried to explain
Her children were not meant to be plain.

As the tune became more discordant, so the lyrics were increasingly corrupted.

…after the stars are gone…
…after the stars are gone…
Ch'thgalhn fhtagn urre'h nyogthluh'eeh ngh syh'kyuhyuh.

"Wake up!" Mary cried. "You're screaming in your sleep. Wake up!" Samuel was crying, and his flailing limbs came into view. Mary bent over me, baby in her right arm, banging my shoulder with her free hand. She looked terrified, and the room was whirling.

It was still night.

Taking hold of my senses, I bolted upright, and the song melted away.

"Mary! Are you all right?"

"Of course, John," she replied, calmer now. "*You* were screaming. What's wrong?"

Did I dare to tell her? *No, it was only a bad dream*. Not worth mentioning.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Perhaps a nightmare,” she suggested, then turned her attention to Samuel. She nursed him, and after a few minutes, he settled, whimpered, and fell back to sleep. Then Mary twisted toward me.

“John, where have you been?” she asked hesitantly, as if reluctant to hear my answer.

“Recuperating,” I said. “I helped—”

“I know that you were not well. I visited you at Professor Fitzgerald’s house while you were unconscious. Mr. Holmes sent word.”

I nodded. “But why did you ask—”

“I know you were knocked out at the tram wreckage. It was in all the papers,” she added. “I felt it best for you to remain at Professor Fitzgerald’s home under Dr. Stoutgarteen’s care. Mr. Holmes agreed—anywhere else, even at a hospital, your care wouldn’t have been as good.”

I’d worked at many of London’s hospitals, and I knew she was right. Our medical facilities were overcrowded, undertended, and not as antiseptic as I might have liked.

“But, John?” she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

“Where have you *been*? Mr. Holmes sent word that you had awakened and were well, that I was not to worry. Yet I did worry, and a great deal. That was many, many hours ago.”

Ah… After my health was restored, why had I not at once returned home to her and Samuel? Perhaps I should have come straight away, and not spent time with Holmes, interviewing Kristoffer Beiler.

“We had a visitor at Fitzgerald’s,” I said, “a man whose father died in a manner strongly resembling the way Willie Jacobs’s father died.” I told her the whole story, and as I did, her face softened. Yet if anything, she was *more* afraid for me now.

“John, you sent word for me and I came to the cigar shop, but I couldn’t find you. When the fire broke out, I ran. Seeking transport home, I returned to the main roads, where police brought me to Mr. Holmes. He made sure that Samuel and I returned here, safely. Yet, John, why did you send for me at all?”

Dare I tell her that it had not been at my request that she'd been lured to the East End?

"My note to you… the note—" I groped for an explanation that would calm her, when abruptly, she cut me off.

"You must cut your ties with Sherlock Holmes," she said. "For your sake, and for ours."

I found that I could not answer. I had planned to tell Mary about Moriarty, yet now I held my tongue. This was one of the most important cases—one of the most serious crimes— that London had ever seen. I could not let Holmes down.

I did not want to fight with my wife, nor did I wish for her to be frightened.

We do our best as men, but we are only mortal beings, flesh and blood—we are prone to errors of judgment. Perhaps I should have told her about Moriarty. She had a right to know that she and Samuel might be in danger. By shielding her, was I doing her a disservice?

Certainly, I thought, she was safe with Lestrade's man outside the flat, watching everyone who came and went.

In the morning, I would make sure that I had indeed seen a policeman across the street rather than a shadow, a trick of my imagination. Tonight, however, all was secure. What could possibly happen with me at home?

And so I gave her the platitudes.

"Don't worry, nothing will happen."

"Everything will be fine."

"I'll be careful."

Yet she seemed unconvinced, so I offered what I thought she wanted to hear most.

"Mary, you always come first, you know that. You're more important to me than anything."

After a moment she tucked her legs back beneath the blankets. She rolled to her side so her back was facing me.

"I'm not so sure, John," she said. "Do I come first, or is it Sherlock Holmes?"

Shocked, I put my hand on her shoulder and gently tugged until she rolled over and I could see her expression.

"Oh, John," she said, and her eyes filled with tears. It nearly broke my heart.

“You and Samuel always come first,” I said, and I meant it. I’d been lonely before Mary, lost. Even with Holmes as my friend and fellow adventurer, I’d had no solace late at night. When I couldn’t sleep, the only sounds that had penetrated the nothingness were the beating of my own heart and the occasional bark of a dog.

At such times, I’d felt empty and found myself thinking, *Is this all there is?* That’s what my life was like before Mary.

I never wanted to lie to her. I never wanted to hurt her.

“Would you stop going off with Holmes if I insisted?” she asked.

I took my hand off her shoulder. I cringed, and she noticed.

“Well, then, that’s my answer,” she said.

“No,” I said quickly, “that’s not your answer.” I hesitated. “You will always come first,” I repeated, “and if you *insist*, I will reluctantly, and very sadly, comply.”

It was she who hesitated this time.

“I won’t *insist*,” she said softly. “Your happiness is important to me, John. Just be more careful. I don’t think I could bear to live without you.” She wrapped her arm over me then, and snuggled close.

I felt like the world’s biggest scoundrel.

In the morning, I would return to the tram machine building to help Holmes examine what was left of the crime scene.

As much as I was flooded with guilt, I also knew that in the morning, I would tell Mary that I was going to my practice with a fully booked slate of patients to see. If she came calling, my nurse would divert any questions Mary posed. *Where was I? Could my wife see me?* No, I was busy with a patient. Or I was out, getting medical supplies or conferring with a fellow doctor. These were harmless lies, weren’t they?

I knew my duties, and I met my obligations, but to be happy—just to be content—I had to be myself, and that required more in my daily life than meat pies, walks, and the whining of patients with sore throats.

If I couldn’t be who I *was*, at the core, if I couldn’t help Holmes with his puzzles, if I couldn’t chronicle his adventures and be enlightened and astounded by his intelligence and his knowledge, if I had to give up all of that, then…

…then what kind of husband would I be to Mary?

The night grew still.

Our baby whimpered.

I heard the beating of my own heart, and I felt Mary's heart where her breasts pressed against my back.

The terrible off-key song roiled in my mind:

She's my *syh'kyuhyuh*
I'm her *urre'h*.
Soon we'll die ne'er to part.

I dreamed that I was back in the luxurious bedroom at Professor Fitzgerald's house. I dreamed, or perhaps I remembered, what had transpired that night when I'd slipped in and out of consciousness.

Dead of night.

Head hurting. Body weak, leg numb.

Tram burning, flesh melting, people screaming…

In the outer room, Fitzgerald sang Italian opera in baritone while a single soprano and two mezzos harmonized. They clinked glasses, they laughed, and the women's voices were so soft and lilting that I imagined his companions to be young and in their prime.

I drifted in and out of sleep, that night…

Head hurting, body weak, leg numb.

Screaming mother, dead child, Mary's face looming, crying…

They sang together, all night it seemed, until finally, I heard gay chatter and doors closing, and then, Fitzgerald sang alone. He sang until the sun trickled through the shutters. But it was no longer Italian opera. The melody had changed, and for hours his baritone lifted to an odd lilt, off-key, eerie keening, sounds that no human voice should be able to achieve.

…after the stars are gone…
…after the stars are gone…
Ch'thgalhn fhtagn urre'h nyogthluh'eeh ngh syh'kyuhyuh.

*

I bolted upright. The sun dribbled through Mary's flowered curtains and cast pink hues around the room. I was sweating, cold.

There, a shadow up by the ceiling, wavering, long fingers of dark, reaching toward me—

I shrank back beneath the covers, head on my pillow, blanket clenched to my chin. The dark fingers stretched thin and curled around the morning light, coiled around it, choking it as a boa constricts and strangles the life from its prey. The pink hues died. Only shadows remained.

Darkness clutched the bed.

I jumped up and ran to the window, whipped back the curtains. Let the light come in! Let the sun come and drench the darkness, quell it, kill it!

But there was no sun. It was overcast, the heavy clouds threatening rain, the fog thick. A flash of lightning illuminated the tops of the buildings across the way.

I'd been through a traumatic experience, and as was often the case with victims of trauma, I was having nightmares. Surely, there was nothing more to it. I almost felt silly. Long fingers of dark reaching for me in my bed. *Ludicrous*. I had to get a grip.

Mary and Samuel still slept, but not for long, I knew. Soon, the baby would cry for his milk.

Quietly and quickly, I took my leave.

I checked for a policeman out front, and yes, he was there, and I assumed that he was one of Lestrade's men. I saw his conical hat, the glimmer of standard-issue metal buttons on his uniform.

My family would be safe.

As for me, I was off to the East End and to danger. My heart beat more quickly. I felt *alive*.

Another flash of lightning, and the sky split open as if by knife and dumped its rain. Cold, chilling, but I didn't care. I needed to work out how to shut down that tram machine. I needed to know the truth behind the mysterious Moriarty's actions. I needed to prevent more murders.

8

Holmes and I were back in Ripper territory. When we passed the bloodstained *MEAT* building, I looked for the boy with the dirty face, but he was nowhere to be seen. As before, we were in a hurry to get to the tram building, for this was a part of town frequented by killers and thieves. The reek of sewage filled my nostrils.

Memories flooded me as they had during the night, but here, the memories were more vivid, and somehow, more real.

For the unfortunate souls living in the East End, like the boy in the *MEAT* building, every day was a nightmare of hunger, filth, poverty, disease, and death. The Ripper had chosen his territory well, for here no one helped a stranger in danger or in need. No one stood guard, watching over a man's wife and infant son. No one slept beneath warm and comfortable blankets in a room with flowered curtains.

Here, life itself was a form of death. People didn't seek adventure or intellectual stimulation. They'd be happy to be in my shoes, eating meat pies and taking boring walks. I felt spoiled and privileged striding alongside Sherlock Holmes.

Perhaps I should force myself to be content with my lot, I thought, *and settle down. Perhaps I should listen to Mary. Perhaps this should be my final case with Sherlock Holmes*.

Everywhere I looked—every corner, every alley—I thought I saw evidence of the Ripper and his victims. A man almost slammed into me. He lurched past, a twisted grin knotting his face. A woman with malformed limbs, one leg longer than the other, one arm missing, offered herself to me for the price of whiskey. There, in a nearby alley, a flash of the knife. There, on that footstep, the gleam of fresh blood. There, and *there*, eyes devoid of even the slightest compassion, eyes dead, toothless gaping mouths.

Close beyond Willie Jacobs's machine building, criminals already caught by London's finest crouched in their own excrement, drooled onto strait jackets, and screamed obscenities inside the Whitechapel Lunatic Asylum. London's worst lived there. The criminally insane. The psychotics who cared nothing for human life. They had stolen, manipulated, and killed without a moment's hesitation, and later, they felt neither guilt nor remorse.

I wondered if the Ripper was like that. I wondered if the man who killed Willie Jacobs's father and Kristoffer Beiler's father was like that.

Holmes came suddenly to a stop. The tram machine building stood before us. He gestured for me to do the honors.

"Are you up to it, old man?" he asked with a concerned expression on his face.

I must have looked as rattled as I felt. Despite the excitement I'd felt anticipating the morning's work, now I was anxious to be done with it.

Still, I nodded.

As I opened the lock by pushing the strange buttons, and we lifted the heavy door, the reek of garlic and decay overpowered that of the outdoor sewage. It seemed to billow from the rumbling machine. I told myself that I would grow used to the odor. I told myself that we wouldn't be here for long.

Holmes strode, unafraid, past the bloodstains to the beast, as Willie Jacobs called it. The darkness was heavy, the only illumination coming from the weak light of an overcast day.

"Come, Watson," he said.

I did so cautiously. The beast hummed loudly, the vibrations coming up through the soles of my shoes, but with nowhere near the violence of our previous encounter. Would it attack again? Would its limbs go wild and smash me to the floor, whip me to the ceiling, crush me beneath steel?

Holmes got down on his hands and knees, then stretched out on the filthy floor. He stared intently at a steel pipe. His knife scraped at a cable that was plugged into a socket by the phosphorus pit. He pried something off the cable and put it into a small pouch. Then he moved farther to the left, where he drew his magnifying glass from a pocket and examined a glistening substance that hung like drool from a large bolt.

Splotches of it fell and coagulated, gray and lumpy, near the edge of the pit. With all my medical experience, I had no idea what the substance might be. I wondered if Holmes had any ideas. The breadth and depth of his scientific knowledge was extraordinary.

"See how it purrs when I stroke it, Watson. The machine is like a domesticated cat."

"Except when it kills," I said drily.

Holmes chuckled.

“Indeed. Perhaps it is more like a jungle cat. A tiger protecting its young.”

I had to admit that the beast struck me as almost alive. One would think it was breathing, the way it thrummed and rattled, the way the floor heaved as rhythmically as a heart beats. I remembered how my heart had beat last night in rhythm with Mary’s. How was this any different?

Holmes scrambled to his feet, ducking beneath low-hanging beams and cables clustered in odd spirals and knots. He disappeared behind the steel limbs, and as he moved amongst its limbs, the beast rumbled more loudly. The metal thumped, the pumps hissed, the pit burbled. Sparks flit overhead like birds at dawn, drifting and diving as if seeking prey.

I backed up a few steps, ready to make a dash for the door. In that moment I swore I would never return to this room, to this building. The beast would never get the better of me again.

“Here you go, Doctor.”

Holmes’s voice broke me from the grip of the beast. He returned from behind the machine and handed me one of two lit torches.

“These were on the walls,” Holmes said, “just like Jacobs’s oil lamp over there. We need to examine the device, so I scouted for more oil lamps and found these torches in the back.”

The hydraulic pump slammed down, and I jumped. Steel chains rattled over my head. Valves clinked.

“Steady. We won’t be here long,” Holmes said. “Come, Watson. Look what I’ve found. Some of the remains of Theodore Jacobs. A chip of bone. And here, another one, bigger.”

I stared at what my friend held in a yellow cloth, which I recognized as one of Mrs. Hudson’s breakfast napkins. I shook my head, and he raised his eyebrows. Nevertheless, I held my torch over the specimens and leaned in to get a closer look at a bit of rotting gore. As I held my breath and peered more closely, I’d swear I saw a faint white glow emanating from the blobs, *and ghostly it was*…

I jerked back my head.

“It’s always good to have a bit of the corpse to examine,” Holmes said casually, “though I’d prefer a larger and much fresher sample. The blood is dry. I’ve gathered what I can upon the cloth.” He tucked Mrs. Hudson’s napkin back into his pocket. It glowed faintly until it vanished from my sight.

Without warning, he handed me his torch, and as I fumbled with it, he swooped down to the floor again.

“Ah, what do we have *here*?” He removed another napkin from his pocket and tucked something into it. “Why, it is an insect, Watson, and a most novel one at that!”

“What’s so novel about it?” I asked, regaining my balance and handing the torch back to him. He frowned as if disappointed with me. I felt like a schoolboy who’d asked a stupid question.

“It’s not of any species I recognize,” he said. “Certainly not native to London. I won’t know where it’s from until I can study it under a much better light.”

Throughout our exchange, the beast bulged from all sides like an overstuffed pig. It wheezed and belched. The thing was even larger than I’d remembered it, as if somehow it had *grown*. It spread farther on both sides, and near the ceiling, tubes swelled like clogged arteries.

Suddenly, one of the arteries burst and sprayed us with thick black muck. The stream was as heavy and forceful as from a fireman’s hose. Holmes and I both cried out and backed away, smearing the stuff from our hair. I wiped my hands on my trousers and my jacket, then I ran for the door with Holmes on my heels.

We dashed out and across the street. Holmes flung his torch into the filthy water clotting the alley in front of us, and I followed suit. Keeping close to the far wall, we turned, and for a moment, stared at the building. Steel cables were tangled at the bottom of the doorway, as if blocking its closure.

This time, it was I who acted first.

Perhaps my military training had kicked in, propelling me to calculate probabilities of injury and death, pushing me to react instinctively. Leaving Holmes by the alley, I dashed back to the building, and with all my might, slammed the door to the ground. The bottom of the door crushed the cables that clung to it. They crackled, spat fire, and went dead.

“What the devil *is* that thing?” I said.

“Lock it,” Holmes said, standing beside me now.

“With pleasure.” I pressed the bizarre door code.

We stood back and stared for a time at the building, then walked silently through the bleak streets back to the main road. There, we caught a carriage and headed back to Baker Street.

*

Inside the carriage, Holmes narrowed his eyes and sank into deep thought. His hair was filthy with the black machine muck, and his face streaked with dirt. I realized that I must look similarly disheveled. I would have to clean up before going home—Mary couldn't see me in such a condition. I still smelled nothing but sewage, grease, and phosphorus.

As the carriage bounced out of the East End and into safer, cleaner streets, he handed me a packet of papers. I stared at the envelope.

"Read this on the way back to Baker Street. These are my notes, copied by one of Lestrade's underlings. Summaries of interviews—some by me, some by Scotland Yard—with the witnesses identified by the police."

"Witnesses to *what*?"

"Events related to the Jacobs murder. People we interviewed while you were unconscious."

I nodded, again feeling as if I were a schoolboy. Then I pulled the papers out and began to read.

Dr. Mortimer Halloron (born 1860, Oxfordshire), married to Helen (born 1862, Birmingham). Residing at 130 Commercial Street.

PC George Mayhew heard screaming on Thrawl Street, found what appeared to be human remains, notified Dr. Halloron at his residence. The doctor arrived at the scene at precisely 2.18 a.m. and assisted Dr. Stephen Williams with the post-mortem at 1.14 p.m.

DR. MORTIMER HALLORON: The deceased was barely recognizable as human. Upon entry at Thrawl Street, I saw three heaps of human remains upon the floor, also one odd stack of bones, and one 30-centimeter spherical bone etched with strange symbols.

No, sir, I didn't recognize any of the symbols.

The deceased's brain matter was smeared on top of the spherical bone. Cast aside near one heap of remains were the shredded remnants of what appeared to be the victim's clothes: black work trousers, rough-cloth shirt, nothing else. No shoes, no hat, nothing.

DETECTIVE BENTLEY: Could you identify any of the remains as human organs?

DR. HALLORON: No, sir. I assumed the brain was human but knew I required more studies to be certain. Such was the [pause] nature of the corpse. I assumed various mounds of remains to be

kidneys, lungs, intestines, but in the dark of the room and given the [pause] destruction of the corpse, I was unsure as to the origin of what I saw.

DETECTIVE BENTLEY: Was there blood upon the floor and walls?

DR. HALLORON: There were several pints of clotted blood, gathered in pools by the remains, also streams of blood all over the floor. [pause] The spherical bone was entirely clean.

MR. SHERLOCK HOLMES: Were there footprints in these pools and streams of blood?

DR. HALLORON: No.

MR. SHERLOCK HOLMES: Blood splashed on the walls?

DR. HALLORON: BLOOD was on the machine that resided in the room, splashed, yes, all over the pipes and cables and other mechanisms. Blood was on the ceiling. A very small quantity of blood, just a few drops, had splashed upon the walls.

Here, I stopped reading. I remembered quite clearly how high the ceiling was in Willie Jacobs's tram machine building. To reach the ceiling, a man would have to climb the machine itself, which rose two stories into the sky. How the deuce could a man be killed on the floor and have his blood splash two stories into the air?

I glanced at Holmes, but he was still immersed in his own thoughts, his head bowed, fingers steepled, eyes closed. And so I continued reading the evidence he'd gathered while I had been unconscious.

DETECTIVE BENTLEY: Did you examine the remains and the bones during the post-mortem?

DR. HALLORON: I did.

DETECTIVE BENTLEY: And did you identify them as human?

DR. HALLORON: [long pause] Partly.

MR. SHERLOCK HOLMES: Sir, please be precise. What part was human, and what part was not? What did you determine about the non-human aspects of the remains?

DR. HALLORON: Fingers, toes, a piece of ribcage: all human. But also present was the unidentifiable 30-centimeter bone. The round object. [coughing] I can't say this is a human bone. In fact, while I refer to it as a bone, it does not have the properties of any animal bone I know.

MR. SHERLOCK HOLMES: Please explain, sir.

DR. HALLORON: The round object was hollow and contained no marrow. It tested negative for inorganic carbonated hydroxylapatite, which chemically gives human bones a particular rigidity. It tested negative for organic collusion. There was no cartilage. No calcium. Frankly, had the round bone been part of the recently deceased, it would have contained evidence of soft tissue, blood, something human.

This bone had no tissue, and I could not identify its substance. In addition, a small hole, perhaps the size of a human eye, was bored into the surface. The edges of this hole were clean and smooth. When I peered inside the hole [long pause]… I saw etched upon the inner surface of the bone another of these strange symbols, approximately 25 centimeters high.

DETECTIVE BENTLEY: Sir, please, to the best of your ability, draw on this paper what you saw inside that bone.

DR. HALLORON: To the best of my ability…

DETECTIVE BENTLEY: For the sake of readers of this interview, I will reproduce here in the transcript the symbol sketched roughly by Dr. Halloron.

DR. HALLORON: But I must tell you that I cannot adequately sketch the symbol. It's almost as if…

DETECTIVE BENTLEY: Yes, Doctor?

DR. HALLORON: …as if it was not etched by a human hand, at all.

DETECTIVE BENTLEY: Why do you say that, sir?

DR. HALLORON: I know of nobody with a hand steady enough to etch anything, much less this elaborate symbol, onto the inside surface of a round bone. The person would require a tool that he inserted into the tiny opening on the other side of the sphere. And then to make *this* particular symbol? Look at its size! No tool could have gone into the hole at the angles required to make this symbol. It is impossible.

As I tried to focus on the symbol, it blurred before my eyes. No amount of blinking caused it to come back into focus. As I tried, it set my teeth on edge, and a shiver ran through me.

But, *no.*…

I was a man of science, a rational man. I would not let this case undermine all I believed in—would not let it agitate me.

Never had I read of a man pulverized—ripped literally to shreds—as reported by Dr. Halloron. What type of killer, what type of *weapon*, could destroy a man's insides, stack his bones, and rip off and fling his skin, nails, fingers, toes, lips, and eyelids around a room?

I scanned the rest of the interview reports. A few witnesses had seen the deceased earlier in the day. He'd quarreled with a Flannery Chapman in a pub the night before his death. Inspector Lestrade had interviewed Mr. Chapman. The quarrel was a simple matter, in which Chapman jostled Jacobs in the local pub. Jacobs lost half his pint, and the two almost went to fisticuffs over the matter. It was nothing that would cause Chapman to commit murder.

If the stomach had been found, the papers didn't note it, yet I didn't need Sherlock Holmes to tell me that the manner of death in this case was not *poison*. Of course, it was possible that the murderer poisoned his victim *before* pulverizing him, then stacked the bones. But I could discern no reason to poison Theodore Jacobs, any more than I could see any reason to destroy his corpse.

Nothing made sense.

At that moment, the carriage lurched to a stop. We had arrived at 221B Baker Street, and I clambered out to follow my friend back into his abode. Mrs. Hudson flitted into view just as Holmes was opening the door to his rooms. She was more flustered than usual, her face flushed, her eyes wild.

"Why, Mr. Holmes, sir, a man came here looking for you," she exclaimed. "He was hysterical, I say, and I feared for my safety in his presence. Indeed, I feared for my life!"

9

“He looked just horrible, and he had a dreadful manner about him. Most threatening, I’d say!”

I was still rattled from reading the interview of Dr. Halloron, but quickly adopted a calm and reassuring demeanor.

“Please, Mrs. Hudson,” I said, placing my hand on her forearm and steering her into Holmes’s sitting room, “have a seat. Yes, that’s a dear. Surely we’ve had our share of unusual visitors here before, yes?”

She nodded, but still looked wary.

“This man, he’s different,” she insisted.

I wondered why Mrs. Hudson feared this particular man. Perhaps she sensed my anxiety regarding the case and my family’s well-being. Perhaps it was my fault she was over-reacting.

“We won’t let any harm befall you, Mrs. Hudson,” I said as kindly as I could. Her eyes fluttered at me, as the flush drained from her cheeks. She relaxed visibly.

“Well, I’m just so glad that you and Mr. Holmes have returned,” she said. “I wasn’t comfortable being here alone with him.”

“Did he hurt you?” Holmes asked.

“No.”

“Did he have a weapon?”

“No.” Then she wrinkled her nose.

“What have you two been up to?” she asked. Her attention shifted to our appearance—the filth smeared on our trousers and jackets, the muck in our hair, the dirt on our faces.

Holmes moved quickly to a cabinet behind his lab bench, removed some glass beakers and vials, and carefully lined them up on the table.

“We slid and fell into some… rubbish,” he said.

“Well, I’d say you both need a good hot bath, and soon.”

“First things first, Mrs. Hudson. What about our visitor?” Holmes said, his words clipped. “Did he say what he wanted?” It was clear to me that he wanted Mrs. Hudson to get to the point.

She fidgeted with her apron, and while I’d never really noticed it before, I saw it was cut from the same yellow cloth as the napkins that Holmes had “borrowed” from his breakfast tray.

“He said he was a wall worker, the son of a dead boot maker. He coughed something awful, bronchitis or asthma, perhaps. He wanted you, Mr. Holmes. He said more deaths would come if you kept poking into the matters of beyond.”

“And what the deuce does that mean?” I exclaimed.

“I don’t know,” the housekeeper replied. “He said he makes cheap fences down in the East End and lives on the street. Has no money to speak of, and he looked it, I’d say. Soiled, worn clothes, ripped to tatters. Lumpy face, swollen like a drunkard’s. Shaggy mutt of a man, hair wild on his face and head both.”

Holmes placed his hands on the lab bench and glanced up from his vials and beakers. He shifted his microscope into place at the far end of the bench and pulled a box of clean slides from a drawer. Then he stood straight and looked squarely at Mrs. Hudson.

“But what did he want,” he said, “other than to warn me off? For surely that is a fool’s errand.”

Her face fell.

“I’m afraid I can’t say, Mr. Holmes,” she lamented. “I hoped you might find my description helpful. I took especial care to take note of the man’s appearance.”

“Yes, well then, was he overweight?”

“No, he was of medium build, lean but muscled.”

“So he wasn’t starving?”

“No…”

“Yet he claimed to have no money, and he wears soiled, worn clothes, ripped to tatters, and he lives on the street. Why, then, is he not rail thin from starvation?”

“I can’t say I know, Mr. Holmes.” Her mouth twitched, and tears filled her eyes.

Poor Mrs. Hudson. She was only trying to help. She put up with the fumes, the fires, the dangers of Holmes’s incessant chemical tinkering. She put up with bullet holes in the walls of his flat. She put up with his outbursts, late hours, drug use, and terrible moods.

I often wondered if she viewed him as the son she never had, for she was an elderly widow and all alone. Perhaps Holmes was the closest thing she had to family.

“You’ve done well, Mrs. Hudson, and we’re grateful,” I said reassuringly. “Now we would love some of your tea and cake. I’m sure they’ll make us both feel so much better.” I squeezed her arm and smiled as warmly as I could without appearing false or condescending. I’d always respected, and even admired the woman. She was kind, brave, and as good a soul as one could ever hope to know.

Instantly, she brightened, and bustled off to procure the tea tray. When I turned to look again at Holmes, he had finished preparing his lab bench. He motioned me to follow him to the basin where we both scrubbed our hands, arms, and faces. Then he slipped on his goggles and held out a pair for me.

“Put them on, dear Watson, and also these—” He handed me a lab apron, and then thrust a bowl of sticking plaster at me. Dutifully, I put on my goggles, wrapped an apron around me, and dabbed plaster on my hands.

“You seem unconcerned about Mrs. Hudson’s visitor and his threats,” I observed. He drew the curtains shut, and the room fell dark. Then he tapped white rocks into a test tube along with a small amount of water poured from a drinking pitcher on the side table. He adjusted a Bunsen lamp, and blue fire instantly flared. Startled, I jumped back.

He laughed at my reaction, then muttered a slight apology.

“I forget. You must still be shaken by the tram fires, dear fellow,” he said. “As to Mrs. Hudson’s visitor, given her description, I’d say the man was a lackey sent by someone else. Possibly Moriarty at work again. Possibly the man responsible for the bizarre murders.”

He paused, then added, “Perhaps they are one and the same.” Then he shook his head slightly, and continued. “Given that Mrs. Hudson can tell us nothing more about the person, I find it more useful to examine the evidence.”

Regaining my composure, I asked what he was doing with the rocks and the water in the test tube.

“Watch!” he said with a touch of drama.

An eerie white glow filled the test tube and spilled over the top. The stink of garlic was overbearing, and I coughed and tried not to breathe through my nose.

“Phosphorus?” I managed to choke out.

“Why, yes, Watson. I’m verifying that what Willie Jacobs feeds that machine is indeed phosphorus. I snatched a bit of the machine’s ‘food’ while we were there.”

The door flew open, and I jumped a bit. Mrs. Hudson stood there, a stout figure holding a tray. In the eerie glow, her eyes widened and her face went white.

“Mr. Holmes, what are you doing? What *is* that awful smell? You’re summoning ghosts into my home! Is that what you’re doing?” The tray crashed to the floor, tea went everywhere, and the pot was broken. Mrs. Hudson was crying, her hands covering her face.

I raced over to her while Holmes opened the curtains and turned off the Bunsen lamp. The flat still reeked of garlic but the fire was gone, as was the phosphorus glow. I hastened the housekeeper into the hall and helped her back to her rooms, where she collapsed on a chaise, fanning herself with an exotic Oriental fan that Holmes had given to her following one of our adventures some years back.

I stayed for a moment to make certain she’d recovered. Returning to Holmes’s flat, I swept up the remains of the teapot, chastising my friend, and I wiped the tea and cake off the floor with a towel. Holmes promised me that he would replace the pot with one far nicer.

“I am sorry about that,” he said. “I know how Mrs. Hudson likes her china.”

“It’s not just about the china,” I said. “You should be more careful with her. She’s really quite elderly, and while she doesn’t seem frail, a bad fright could do her harm.”

Holmes pulled the yellow napkins from his pocket and opened them on the lab bench. His eyes were alight with amusement, though not unkindly.

“Well, then, I suggest you bolt the door, Watson,” he said. “You wouldn’t want Mrs. Hudson to see what comes next.”

“Ah, yes. Dried blood first, or bones, or the poisons?” I secured the door and tested the knob to make sure we weren’t interrupted by well-fed but impoverished wall workers or well-meaning but delicate housekeepers. “Actually, why *are* we testing for poisons, Holmes? Don’t you think it unlikely that poison was the cause of death in these cases?”

“It is always instructive to test for the presence of unusual chemicals,” Holmes answered. “We must test for everything, to make sure we’re not overlooking anything important. You don’t know what you’ll find, Watson, unless you look for it.”

“Don’t forget that we have a mysterious insect to inspect, as well,” I said, and he nodded.

“I prefer to examine the body tissues first,” he said, “before they dry any further. I don’t have much, just these tiny bits of Mr. Jacobs’s remains. With the blood dry, it will be very hard to detect poison with what little we have. Why the police don’t secure crime scenes better is beyond my comprehension. They lose valuable evidence and muddle up my investigations.” He gestured toward a notebook and pencil. “Take notes for me, would you, Watson?”

“I’m happy to do so,” I said. We washed our hands again, then Holmes dropped back onto his chair by the bench.

“First, concerning the scrap dropped by Kristoffer Beiler when we met in Professor Fitzgerald’s sitting room. I’ve already run some tests, while you were with your family, and confirmed that it is *not* paper.

“Paper disintegrates with age and under stress,” he continued. “Animal hide, properly prepared, would have a much better chance of survival. My tests cannot identify the animal, but the material is biological. As for the marks on the scrap, I’m fairly certain it’s blood, but cannot perform conclusive tests on such a tiny sample.” He rapped his fingers on the lab bench.

“I doused a bit of the scrap with hydrogen peroxide, looking for bubbles. It was a long shot, Watson. If the blood were fresher, the material would bubble profusely. When the results were negative, I ran a few tests for common inks. Those too were negative.”

“So we can’t identify, for sure, the nature of the scrap that Kristoffer Beiler dropped,” I said. “But Holmes, we don’t know that the scrap means anything, do we?”

He glanced at me and frowned, then focused on the elder Jacobs’s remains, minute fragments deposited on dishes across the lab bench.

“We must move quickly now, and run tests on Mr. Jacobs’s remains, what little we have,” he said. Then he moistened a ball of cloth and dabbed it on a piece of brownish-purple body fat accompanied by a flake of skin. He removed the cloth and showed me the brownish-purple stain upon it, then using a dropper, applied ethanol to the stain.

His fingers, long and slim, remained steady throughout the procedure. He had the nerves and the hands for medicine, but it would have been too boring for Holmes, and he certainly hadn’t the temperament for it.

He squeezed a few drops from the cloth into a beaker, then added white crystals, which I knew to be sodium hydroxide, followed by a yellowish

liquid, which I knew to be ammonium sulfate. Such familiarity came easily, since for years I'd watched him work at his chemistry bench, noting the jars, bottles, and methods countless times.

The liquid in the beaker turned the color of dark wood. A brown residue sank to the bottom.

"Only hemoglobin reacts this way," Holmes announced as if to an audience of medical students. He'd always been proud of the blood test he'd devised, back when I first met him at St. Bart's Hospital.

Having established that we had a viable blood sample, he prepared a slide for his microscope. Slipping it under the lens and securing it in place, he peered into the instrument.

"There's something here, Watson!" He grabbed me and positioned me to peer into the microscope, and I squinted through the long tube and examined the blood sample. Some of the corpuscles were circular and flat, with indentations— as if a tiny thumb had been pressed in the middles of the cells. This was how I expected to see human blood cells.

Others were elliptical and also flat with the indentations. Those were also what I might expect. But some of the corpuscles looked… *strange*. They were huge and lopsided, with large center structures not found in human blood cells.

"Clearly, this is not due to the fact that the blood has already dried and is getting old," I said.

"Exactly, Watson. Old blood doesn't look like this."

My mind raced. Where had I seen such structures? Peering through the lens again, I noted other abnormal shapes, and my confusion increased.

A clock from the rooms beneath us chimed, interrupting my train of thought. It was Mrs. Hudson's clock, indicating that it was now eight o'clock at night. Those infernal chimes had often awakened me on each hour when I lived here.

"A frog's cells?" I offered, returning to the matter at hand. "Perhaps this isn't human blood, after all."

"Granted, frog cells are large, but they are elliptical, not lopsided. Even dried blood wouldn't account for cells that are trapezoids, triangles, and hexagons—not to mention the bizarrely shaped dodecahedrons and icosahedrons."

Some of the blood cells had clearly been spherical before Holmes had flattened them on the microscope slides. They had ruptured and disgorged

purple contents, dried now but conceivably once liquid in nature.

“No animal I know has blood cells that look like any of these,” Holmes said.

“What do you think we’re looking at, Holmes?”

“I can’t say. Perhaps a creature as yet unknown to scientists? I can only guess—and I never guess about anything, Watson.” He pushed a napkin across the lab bench, and there were the two chips of bone he’d found in the tram machine building. “What do you make of these fragments?”

“They’re too small for identification,” I said. “They require chemical analysis.”

He shoved another napkin my way.

“And the mysterious insect?”

“You said it wasn’t from around here.”

“Indeed, it is not.” He prodded the insect onto a slide and studied it with his microscope. “It’s an ice bug, a rock crawler, much bigger than most. Notice the fine hairs, the pale body, the absence of both wings and eyes. It’s a female. Notice the ovipositor, this thing that looks like a sword. These insects are scavengers, Watson. They eat other dead insects.”

“And you’re certain they aren’t found anywhere in England?”

He stared at me, loathe to repeat himself. “They live in frozen environments,” he said finally. “Glaciers, for example, and ice caves. An associate, Professor Hans Pucht, has mentioned them to me in our correspondence.”

“Then how did it come to be in London?” I asked. “Was it transported with the metals, or the phosphorus? Did the deceased somehow ingest this bug in a meal?”

“Perhaps,” Holmes said, “but it’s highly unlikely. Jacobs obtained both the metals and phosphorus locally, and it seems highly unlikely that he somehow ate the creature, whether on purpose or by accident.”

“Then *how*—?”

“I don’t know yet, but please include it in your notes.” I did as asked, then we examined the bone fragments. One looked much like an auditory ossicle, found in the human ear, one of the smallest bones in the human body. Using a vernier caliper, Holmes measured the lengths of the remaining bone fragments, and I recorded the results.

“Without much larger samples, we can’t effectively determine whether these are human or animal in nature,” Holmes said. “Unlike the spherical

bones, these *could* be human."

I reminded him that Dr. Halloron had concluded that the crime scene contained unidentifiable, non-human bones, but this fact didn't mollify him. Indeed, he scowled at the notion.

"My standards are higher than those of others," he said. "Non-human bones—what's the logic in it, Watson? A man is ripped to shreds, and the killer adds non-human bones to the mix, stacking them at odd angles? Why have them there to begin with? Why bother?" He shook his head. "No, it makes no sense. These bits that we have here must be from the corpse—or at the very least, they resulted from the crime."

I had to concur and wanted to move on, but Holmes insisted that we tinker further with the fragments. For several hours, I helped him apply chemicals to chips broken off the bone, and for hours, he muttered and shook his head. No matter what he did, he couldn't determine their nature.

I was almost asleep when he finished. My mind was reeling, possibly from the chemicals that laced the air, or perhaps from the late hour. As I added another note to the journal, he suggested that we tackle our final tests—looking for poisons in Theodore Jacobs's remains.

"It's unlikely that we'll find anything, but we need to try," he said. "Arsenic is a known method of poisoning these days, as is belladonna. Though it's almost certain the man wasn't poisoned to death, our examination might turn up something entirely unanticipated. This line of inquiry should be brief, however."

He pulled a U-shaped glass tube from beneath his bench and poured some zinc into the more tapered opening. With a thin probe, he prodded a bit of Mr. Jacobs's remains into the other end, along with some acid. Instantly, I recognized the procedure introduced by James Marsh in 1836, which was used to identify the presence of arsenic during the trial of Marie LaFarge.

"But we don't have sufficient body fluids to make the test work," I objected.

Holmes's response was to glower fiercely—not at me, but at the U-tube and its contents. His usually neat hair was disheveled, and black greasy spikes stuck out over his forehead. Whiskers were prominent, also unusual for him, and moisture glistened on his cheeks.

"When's the last time you got some rest?" I asked. The frown deepened beneath the greasy black hair. The gray eyes shifted from the U-tube and

burned into me.

“I’ll sleep when I know what happened to Mr. Jacobs and Mr. Beiler,” he said. “I need to know who killed them, and I intend to find out. Now are you going to help me?”

Holmes could be infernally stubborn, despite what it might do to his health. He could also become irritable when faced with failure, and tonight, he had failed to identify the bone chips found at the crime scene. The sooner I helped him test for poisons, the sooner he’d rest and eat, and the sooner he’d snap back to normal.

“We must rule out everything we can, Watson,” he continued. “We must gather and record all information. Otherwise, we cannot determine what is truth and what is not.”

“Quite true, but perhaps instead of using Marsh’s old technique—” I pointed at the U-tube and its tiny bit of Mr. Jacobs’s remains “—and given the limited quantities of liquids and body tissue we have to work with—”

“Yes, yes, get on with it,” he said impatiently.

“Why not use Reinsch’s test of 1842? Or some of the tests we have for other poisons? Morphine overdose, strychnine, nicotine, even cocaine. Since Marsh and Reinsch’s tests came to public knowledge, murderers have been shifting more and more to poisons other than arsenic and antimony.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” he responded. “Arsenic is still widely used. If the police don’t keep up with modern science, why should the murderers? You yourself point out that we have only the faintest of a sample. It’s in our best interests to test for the most prominently used substances.

“Besides,” he added, “we really would need fluids, which we do not have, for Reinsch’s test. We must do our best with what little we do have, Watson.”

“Quite true,” I agreed. I put my paper and quill on a side table next to Holmes’s favorite chair. Setting up a flask with a glass tube nozzle, I poured ten milliliters of hydrochloric acid into the flask, added a bit of Mr. Jacobs’s remains and approximately three grams of granular zinc, and then pushed a stopper into the nozzle.

The acid and remains mixed, and then the zinc and acid merged. The bottle filled with gas. I removed the stopper, waited a few seconds, and then lit a match and held it at the end of the nozzle. Holmes grabbed one of Mrs. Hudson’s tea saucers from his side table and held it near the flame. A faint black line smudged the saucer.

“Possibly arsenic,” Holmes said. “Possibly antimony—”

“—but there’s no way to know.” I finished the thought for him. The result was too faint, and our reagents of zinc and acid might actually be the source of the poisons we sought. Only the purest reagents would give clean results, and for that we needed better samples from our corpse.

“Write in your journal, Watson, that our tests are inconclusive.”

I did as Holmes asked, and with our tests complete, if inconclusive, we turned our attention to ourselves—we were still utterly filthy. Before too long, we had removed the grime. Holmes shaved and donned clean clothing, and fortunately for me, I found a change of clothes I had left at 221B. The trousers were tight, for Mary fed me much too well, but I managed to squeeze myself into them.

Soon the conversation returned to the case at hand. The fact remained that, even if Mr. Jacobs had been poisoned, his killer had shredded his body and heaped the remains and bones all over the floor.

“What does it matter,” I said, “if the man died first from poisoning and later was hacked to death?”

“*Think*,” he said.

I fumbled for an answer. It had to be simple. It had to be logical. But what was it?

Holmes stared at me.

“It’s obvious,” he said. “If we could find poison in the corpse, and then trace the purchase or use of that poison to an individual, we might have a clue as to the identity of the killer.”

“I suppose so,” I granted, “but as you so aptly pointed out, poisons are in common use for all sorts of purposes.”

“Yes, Watson, but we never rule out any avenue of inquiry, because we don’t know where it will lead until we follow it. For example, should we be able to prove that both Jacobs and Beiler were poisoned with the same substance, then we would be looking for a killer with a fair acquaintance to the poison, and someone with access to it.” He frowned.

“Nothing is known, Watson, until we prove it.”

10

The downstairs door creaked then slammed shut. Mrs. Hudson's clock chimed the hour. It was four in the morning.

Had we really been working that long?

Mary will kill me.

Someone wheezed on the stairs, grunted, and then we heard Mrs. Hudson, further away.

"You can't go up there, sir," she protested. "Not unannounced!" Her footsteps followed those of the intruder, and the two of them were at our door. As Holmes swung it open, Mrs. Hudson pushed aside the visitor, wrinkled her nose, and stepped tentatively into the flat.

"What smells in here? What have you been doing *now*, Mr. Holmes? What is this *awful* smoke?" She peered around the room. "*Are those my napkins?*"

Blessedly for Holmes, he had no time to answer, for Willie Jacobs shuffled in, crossed the room, and threw himself onto Holmes's favorite chair.

"I've been hidin' from the coppers, as you say," he growled. "I 'ave nowhere to go, nowhere but 'ere, so 'ere I am." His voice was a rasp, and he looked worse than before. A small red-gray sore had erupted beneath his chin. His nostrils were scabbed with blood, and yet he continued to jab them with his right thumb. He was filthy, his clothes caked with muck, and he smelled so bad that the stink overpowered the fumes from Holmes's lab tests.

"You can't stay here!" Mrs. Hudson said indignantly, then she turned to my friend, hands on her hips. "I won't have it, Mr. Holmes, I won't!"

"Yes, yes, not to worry," he said. "This poor man won't be moving in anytime soon. We'll find a decent place for him."

I wondered where *that* might be…

She frowned suspiciously, and returned her attention to the work bench. Holmes reassured his housekeeper that he'd buy new napkins for her, as well as a teapot, and that he'd open the windows and air his flat. He apologized for the commotion at such a late hour, and then he firmly planted a hand on her arm and ushered her to the door.

“Well, I *never*,” she said. “Sometimes, I wonder about you, Mr. Holmes, I do.”

“And what do you wonder, Mrs. Hudson?” he asked, bowing slightly. Having regained the upper hand, his eyes twinkled.

“Well,” she said, flustered, “well…” Given her kind nature, I knew that she didn’t want to further insult Willie Jacobs in his presence, and so she said, “I worry that all this—” her hands fluttered around her head “—all *this*, whatever it is that you do in these rooms, that it’ll be the death of you.”

Holmes threw back his head and laughed. Then he gently squeezed both of her shoulders.

“You worry too much,” he said. “I’m not ready for death, nor am I afraid of it.” When she blanched, he quickly added, “But nothing will happen tonight, I assure you.” He smiled broadly at her.

“I’ll take you on your word, then,” she said, “and I’ve never known you to break your word, Mr. Holmes.”

“Thank you,” he said simply.

“Yes. Well, I’ll be going now.”

“You do that, Mrs. Hudson.” He gave her another smile, and after she left, he straightened his back against the closed door and rolled his eyes.

“Now then,” he said, “Mr. Jacobs. How nice to see you again, sir.” Holmes settled into my chair near our visitor, and I remained on the lab stool. “If I were to learn that two men had been poisoned by the exact same substance,” Holmes asked our visitor, “what would that tell you, sir?”

The pus-filled eyes swiveled at Holmes and blinked. The intertwined knuckles jabbed at the enlarged, bloody nostril. The doctor in me recoiled.

Jacobs didn’t hesitate with his answer.

“It would tell me that maybe you can find the man who buys the poison, or maybe many men who buy that poison, and then you can watch those men,” he rasped.

“And?” Holmes shifted forward, elbows on knees, fingers steepled beneath his chin.

Again, Jacobs didn’t hesitate.

“And you watch those men because the poisoner, the killer, will probably strike again. You can prevent another murder.”

“Exactly!” Holmes didn’t look my way, for which I was grateful, having been out-thought by Willie Jacobs. And yet my argument stood, if only in

my mind, for if a hundred men had procured arsenic, how could Lestrade possibly keep track of them all?

"You would watch only the men livin' near me buildin'," Jacobs added, out-thinking me again. "Only problem is, Mr. 'olmes, me father was killed by the beast, *not* by a man and *not* by poisons."

Holmes abruptly switched the topic.

"Where have you been, Mr. Jacobs?"

"Hidin' in alleys and down by the Thames. Coppers are at me buildin'. They've taken o'er. They're trying to dismantle the beast. People will die, I tell you, and it won't be pretty."

Holmes ignored the hysteria burbling to the surface of Jacobs's voice.

"Where do you get the phosphorus that you feed the machine?" he asked.

"From the match factories. It's easily got. I know plenty o' women who work in them factories."

"Yes, of course. The match factories. This all makes sense. Of course." Then again, Holmes abruptly switched the topic. "That's all very fine. Now, Watson, where will this good man sleep?" Holmes edged toward his sleeping chamber, slicking his disheveled hair back, then turned his attention back to me. "He can't stay here. I'm sorry, old man, but Mrs. Hudson won't stand for much more, I fear."

With that, he disappeared into his chamber and shut the door, leaving me alone with Willie Jacobs. I stared after him in silent disbelief.

I didn't live here anymore. I had to return home, and given that I'd been out all night with Sherlock Holmes, Mary would not be pleased.

Gazing at the shut door, I remembered Holmes's earlier assertion that he wouldn't sleep until he'd solved the Jacobs case. At that I chuckled. I knew he'd be asleep before I hailed a carriage home. My humor, however, was short-lived.

"Where should I go for the night, sir?" Jacobs asked me. "Back to the alleys or down to the Thames? Might you give me a lift?"

Oh, Lord…

I couldn't let the poor man sleep outside again. I couldn't let him go on as he was, filthy, hungry, and now *homeless*. I couldn't leave him at 221B Baker Street, for surely if the police were seeking him it would be one of their first stops. After all, Willie Jacobs was a client, of sorts.

Perhaps I could open up my practice and let him bunk there. But I feared leaving anyone alone with my equipment and medicines, and there were my

files to consider. Patients demanded privacy and confidentiality. It was a matter of principle.

Where, then, could I take him?

Not to a hospital. Not with the police after him.

I gazed at him, assessing his state. Kind eyes. Thoughtful eyes. Probably not a madman as I'd earlier presumed. No. This man was hurt, he was gentle, he was ill and starving.

I made up my mind, knowing the consequences I would face.

"I'll put you up," I said, "but only briefly, only until we find something more suitable."

"But what about your wife?" Jacobs exclaimed. "Are you not married? What will she think o' this? I can't allow it, kind doctor, your kindness is too much."

"Now, now," I said. My mind whirled, seeking some justification I could give to Mary for bringing Willie Jacobs into our home. "It'll be good to have you around for protection while I'm gone during the days. I worry about her being all alone there with the baby. You do like babies, don't you, Mr. Jacobs?"

"Why, I'll guard your wife and baby as if they are me own!" Jacobs cried, and then his right hand flew to his nose and jabbed rapidly, causing his head to tilt back as blood trickled from his nose.

Before I could reconsider my decision, I grabbed my felt bowler and walking stick.

"Come on, then," I said.

Jacobs nodded and muttered profuse thanks, bowing and bobbing as he trailed along behind me.

Kindhearted as she was, what would Mary say?

I trembled to think of it.

11

Mary grasped the heart-shaped locket and pressed it to her chest. I'd given the necklace to her when we were married, and she never took it off. In times of great emotion— whether joy or anguish—she held it to her heart.

I couldn't quite tell if she was happy to see me, upset and ready to reprimand me, or both.

"John, you're all right! Nothing's happened to you! Oh, I was so worried!" When she threw her arms around me, I had my answer. Feeling a pang of guilt, I hugged her in return, and stroked her hair.

Then I drew back, hands on her upper arms, and stared long and hard at her. This was my Mary, so beloved to me, the mother of my only child, born prematurely and still frail. We'd struggled to have a child. I should be completely content now, and happy with my lot. Here was my wife, so beautiful, her eyes filled with tears of joy to see me. No one would ever love me like Mary. Nobody would ever worry about me as she did.

I removed my bowler, and she took it and hung it by the door.

"And who is this?" she asked. The warm blue of her eyes turned toward Willie Jacobs, and her nose wrinkled, though not unkindly. Her hands flew back to her locket. "A good evening to you, sir," she said.

I introduced our guest and explained that he was a client of Sherlock Holmes, that he needed accommodation.

"Temporarily," I added.

She studied my face for what felt like an age.

"Only if it suits you and your own," Jacobs said. I noticed that he still stood by the door. He'd not yet entered our home. He stood there, fidgeting with the buttonholes of his ripped jacket. I saw that it had no buttons. He cast his eyes down, and the light from Mary's gas lamp shone off the grease on his balding head. Brown splotches crept over his forehead and toward his eyes like some hideous fungal growth.

A hand rose from the buttonholes and trembled in the air midway to his nose. His large nostril swelled and snorted. The smaller nostril was caked shut with dried pus.

"You 'ave a real 'ome," he said. "I know not o' such places. I know not if I belong. I know not." His hand dropped to his side. His head remained bowed.

More than ever, I felt *compelled* to help Willie Jacobs.

“He’ll help keep you safe,” I told my wife. She stared at me, wide-eyed, and my voice cracked. I cleared my throat. “Please,” I said. “It’ll be temporary. No touching of the baby. No direct contact.” When her face flared with alarm, I added, “Only as a safety precaution. It might be wise for you to have a man here, any man, while I’m at my practice. Keep you and Samuel safe. Help with chores. He can be useful.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Jacobs’s hand twitch and shift upward toward his nose. His eyes lifted and met mine. Strings of pus obscured his irises.

“Excuse me, sir,” Mary said to Jacobs, and then to me, “John, is his medical condition *safe*?” I knew she was worried about Samuel. So was I. Never would I put my son at risk. I’d briefly examined Jacobs at Baker Street and considered his symptoms before bringing him home.

His skin wasn’t hot. The sores on his face and scalp were free of the red puffiness of infection. He complained of no body aches, joint pains, headaches, and no sore throat. He did not mention problems with eating, vomiting, diarrhea, or constipation. His breathing was normal, no harsh rattling in his throat. The rasp was due to missing teeth.

Although Holmes and I had been with Jacobs in close quarters several times, neither of us displayed any of his symptoms. It was obvious that his problems were not caused by the usual suspects—tuberculosis, cholera, diphtheria, staphylococcus. His odd mannerisms could be explained by quirks of personality.

“Whatever is wrong with this fellow, I don’t believe he is contagious,” I said. “He may have an infection in his eyes, but I haven’t caught it, and neither has Holmes. So, Mr. Jacobs,” I turned my attention to him, “no touching of Mary and Samuel, and please keep your distance, good fellow.”

Jacobs bobbed his head up and down.

“Whate’er you need, Mrs. Watson, I will do. I’ll stay clear o’ your wee one, I swear it on me life.”

“John, I can’t have Samuel infected with anything,” Mary insisted, “not in his eyes, nothing.”

One medical journal had reported that doctors had treated infected eyes with drops of a 1-to-1000 bichloride solution. I’d never tried this technique, nor did I know if Jacobs’s case mandated it. Medicine was such a

frustrating business. I wanted to help patients, cure them, but so often, I felt myself floundering with insufficient diagnostic techniques.

It struck me, in that moment, that perhaps this was why I was so drawn to Holmes. Like my criminologist friend, I constantly sought new evidence concerning illness and its remedies. And like Holmes, I knew that it was critical to examine the evidence before I evaluated, much less treated, my patients.

“Mary, it will be safe,” I said. “Jacobs here has no fever. His eyes aren’t red or puffy. It may be a simple matter of letting the poor fellow wash his eyes often. The rest of his condition—and excuse me, sir, for speaking about you in this way—the rest is safe to be around. Of this, I am fairly sure.”

That seemed to satisfy Mary. She trusted me in these matters.

“Fine,” she said. “Temporarily, sir, you are welcome to stay in our home. Why don’t you wash now—and pay particular attention to your eyes? I’ll give you some of John’s older clothes to wear. Perhaps a nice pair of trousers and a warm shirt would suit you?”

My wife gestured for Jacobs to follow and he shuffled behind her, muttering more thanks as she led him toward the bathroom in the rear of our flat.

“Come out when you’re done,” she called once he had gone in, “and I’ll give you a fine plate of food. Perhaps tea and cheese and some biscuits and jam.”

Soon I heard the splashing of water from the pitcher into the basin, the ecstatic moaning of a man enjoying the simple pleasures of life for the first time in God only knew how long.

I eased into my chair and sank back in relief. It was most unlike the chairs in Holmes’s abode. Here, my chair was the perfect depth for my legs, the back was curved to fit me with utmost comfort, and as I stretched out my hurt leg, I closed my eyes to relax—finally, to relax.

Home felt good.

Home was Mary, not Sherlock Holmes.

I listened to the sound of her boiling some water, and soon a cup and saucer rattled on my end table, and I smelled the fragrance of my favorite tea. I opened my eyes. Home-baked biscuits sat on a lilac-and-rose dish next to my cup. Mrs. Hudson took pride in her biscuits, always fresh and delicate, and her jam, always the perfect blend of tart and sweet.

Nevertheless, Mary's biscuits tasted fresher and more delicate, and she added figs to her jam, knowing my particular tastes.

I sipped the tea and nibbled a biscuit, marveling at my great fortune, particularly as contrasted to Jacobs's very poor lot in life. It was the draw of the cards that I'd been born able to afford medical schooling and a life of some ease, and an equal draw of the cards that Jacobs had spent his existence with a machine, feeding the thing phosphorus, greasing it with fat, and sleeping on a cold floor.

Didn't those of us who'd been luckier at the draw owe it to the less fortunate to help them? They were no less deserving. They were people, just like us. God help me if I was ever down and out like Willie Jacobs—I would want to find some meager compassion in this hard world.

Drawers opened and closed, very softly, in my bedroom. Mary was humming. The bathroom door creaked.

"Here, take these," my wife said.

When she returned to the sitting room, she continued to speak softly. I knew she didn't want to awaken the sleeping Samuel.

"John," she said, startling me, "might it be the Irish behind these killings?"

There was a large population of Irish Republican terrorists and their children and grandchildren in the city. Many had been driven to London by the Great Irish Famine during the late 1840s.

"Desperate people driven to extreme behavior," my wife said. "They remain agitated."

She was right, of course. Irish Republicanism and political violence had become a real problem in the 1860s. In 1867, twelve people died when the Fenians detonated bombs at the Clerkenwell House of Correction, trying to free one of their incarcerated members.

I'd discussed the case at length with Holmes, who was a human encyclopedia of knowledge when it came to all things criminal, past and present. While six Irishmen had been placed on trial for murder, only one had been found guilty.

"You might have a point," I told my wife. "I'll have to mention it to…" I let my voice trail off. I didn't want to mention the name, just yet.

"Yes, Mr. Holmes *should* consider the possibility," she said. "Quite recently, within the past ten years easily, they've exploded bombs all over

London. Government offices. Newspapers. Victoria Station. London Bridge and the Tower of London."

Willie Jacobs returned, carrying a candle. The light from the wick illuminated his face, freshly scrubbed but still pockmarked. He'd washed the pus from his eyes, yet a film coated the whites. Scrubbing had caused the sores around his nostrils to erupt, and ragged fingernails had clawed at the scabs. Blood trailed to his upper lip and spread, dripped into his mouth and off his chin.

My clothes hung like bags on his gaunt frame, my shirt too large and long, my trousers rolled up at his ankles and hoisted in place with an old belt. Even my oldest, most dilapidated attire was like a king's finery compared to Jacobs's own clothes. He seemed pleased with the outfit, admiring it from all angles.

Then he tottered, and he grabbed the back of Mary's rocking chair to steady himself. The rocking chair lurched backward, and I jumped from my chair to ease the poor fellow into it. Mary placed food before him and refreshed the teapot at his side. She offered him a fresh cup.

He took it, hands shaking, eyes lowered. Tea sloshed over the side of the cup and onto his lap, and when he almost dropped the cup, I grabbed it from him and set it on the saucer.

"Might you 'ave a bit o' whiskey?" he asked.

"Most certainly." I poured Jacobs a stiff drink, and gave myself one, as well. He drained his glass before I'd had but three sips. His hands weren't shaking quite as much, and he appeared calmer, more relaxed.

I looked at my wife. She mouthed the word, *Alcoholic?* I shrugged, not so sure about that. He was traumatized. I'd wanted a bit of whiskey myself after the tram accident and my injuries.

"I am the one. I caused the death o' me father and all the people in Whitechapel that day," Jacobs said.

"Why, whatever do you mean?" Mary said.

"The beast killed me father, ma'am, but it was only reactin' to what I done." He turned the bleary eyes toward me. "You understan', don't you, Doctor?"

"I can't say that I do, no. Machines malfunction. Accidents happen. As for your father, you must get it through your head, dear sir, that a killer is responsible. A *human* killer."

“You can’t know that for sure,” he said, then he glanced sheepishly at me. “More whiskey?”

I refilled his glass, and he continued.

“Ah yes, lovely, it is. Yes, I were sayin’, I was—” he again gulped the whiskey and set the glass on the table “—that all the bad things are me own fault. I tampered with the beast, Dr. Watson, only a little, but the beast don’t like tamperin’. I adjusted a few screws, that’s all, things that seemed needed, nothin’ that should o’ gotten it angry. And the beast went berserk and killed me father, and the tram flew off its tracks.” His eyes took on a haunted look. “It is me fault, you see.”

I didn’t know what else I could say to this man to convince him that he was wrong. The drink had gotten to his head, I was sure of it. If I could dry out Willie Jacobs, maybe he would finally realize that his thinking was twisted.

“You’re too hard on yourself,” I said. “Here, eat something, Mr. Jacobs. It’ll do you good.”

But he had slumped in the chair, face on his knees, arms dangling at his sides, knuckles on the rug.

“Gaaaah!” he wailed. “Gaaaah! Tis me fault! No way up, no way out, a slave to the demon beast! I’ll ne’er be free o’ it, ne’er!” He turned his head and looked up at me. Blood and tears slicked his face.

I raced to his side. Mary was near tears herself but kept her distance. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she gasped.

Much as I pitied Mr. Jacobs, I wished then that I’d left him with Holmes for the night. Mrs. Hudson was better suited to dealing with this man than my wife.

“I’ll ne’er be free o’ it, ne’er,” he muttered.

“No, no, you’re wrong,” Mary said. “You *are* free, Mr. Jacobs.”

“I’m not. *I’m not*. You can’t change your past, you can’t change who you are!”

“I think he needs rest,” I told Mary. “Let’s get him into the back room, shall we?”

She blew her nose on a pink-trimmed cloth.

“Come,” she said to Jacobs, “let’s get you to bed. Tomorrow’s another day.” This time, she didn’t back off from him. She half-lifted him from the chair and helped him down the hall.

I picked up my glass and downed my whiskey.

Willie Jacobs had no wife, no family. He'd been born into the lowest economic class in the worst slums of London. He was right about his lot in life. He *wasn't* a free man. He didn't know how to do anything but service the machine, and now, nobody would want him to take care of that machine ever again. People wanted it shut down. How would Jacobs eke out a living? Possibly, I thought, as a machinist in the industrial squalor of London, at a factory of some kind.

Mary knew first-hand what life was like for the down-and-out. With her mother already dead, her father had sent her from India back to Edinburgh when she was very young. Although she'd grown up in a comfortable boarding establishment, she'd missed the warmth of family. Mary always had a soft heart for people in need. It was one of the reasons I fell in love with her.

She would help Willie Jacobs.

That thought yielded a pang of guilt. I'd just given my wife another person to take care of. Now she had to tend to a baby *and* Willie Jacobs.

*

The whiskey was working its magic, and I was dozing off when Mary roused me.

"John, you should rest in the bed. Come."

"I don't know what I'd do without you." I stood and embraced her, and then I led her back to the room we shared with Samuel. Leaning over the bed, I looked at him. So tiny, so soft, so fragile, so *perfect*.

Tiny hands balled into fists. Mouth cooing in his sleep.

Mary and I were very lucky.

It was important to remember that others were not so fortunate. Others like Willie Jacobs. A hard life dehumanizes people.

Jacobs still had a soul. He felt grief and responsibility. He felt remorse. And yet he was a desperate man if ever I'd met one. He had probably known fear before he knew how to talk. The fear had grown as he matured, had crystallized and hardened in his soul. He trembled, he drank, he couldn't rip from his mind the image of his father, hacked to pieces, his face smashed in, his eyes exploding, the mounds of bones and skin and blood…

Yes, to look at Willie Jacobs was to look at *fear*.

Hard, cold fear.

PART TWO

THE CREST OF DAGON

12
JAMISON LUDSTHORPE

Whitechapel Lunatic Asylum

Ol’ Boil balled ’is fists. ’is frown straightened to a thin line. Jibber strapped the black rings onto Ol’ Boil’s neck and ’ead and then rammed down the lever o’ the device. All aroun’— from all sides—laughter, shriekin’, a crescendo of ’ysteria and ’ilarity. I whipped aroun’ starin’ at them all, and then burst out laughin’ meself.

Wasn’t it just so funny you could die?

Ol’ Boil in the chair, all ’is body parts strapped tightly in, ’is eyes bulgin’ like they was gonna spring out o’ them sockets, ’is tongue stickin’ out from them thin-line lips. I never did see nothin’ like it before, ’cept maybe Dorothy the Washerwoman when they jacked ’er full o’ juice, too. She’d up and died two nights later, she did.

Here be Ol’ Boil, probably gonna die, too.

Lucky sod.

I ducked behin’ the One With the Strap in ’er Mouth. She was gaggin’, ’er face red, tears wheezin’ from ’er eyes. She whirled and gestured at me to remove the strap. ’er eyes was ablaze, and so I whipped to me left to get away from ’er, but I slammed into ’im With No Teeth, slumped by the wall and bleedin’.

Back I looked at Ol’ Boil. Eyes bulgin’ somethin’ awful, like they was gonna pop. Like balloons pop, and ain’t that the funniest thing e’er? I was laughin’ so ’ard I ’ad to clench me stomach to keep from fallin’ o’er.

The crazies were all aroun’ me, they were, most o’ them without their ’air, just some scabby scurvy growths on their ’eads. Black and blue, red, dented skulls, stitched skulls, leakin’ skulls, leakin’…

Jibber—’e was the man nurse—’e grabbed the lever with both ’ands and ’e rammed it back up. The device stopped sizzlin’.

The crazies moaned disappointments. I pushed aside the One With the Strap in ’er Mouth. She came flutterin’ at me, and I batted ’er off. Damn woman.

Jibber wandered off, probably to find Nurse Death—she assisted ’im in the *worst cases*. I wasn’t a worst case. Death ’adn’t been round to ’elp Jibber with me yet, and maybe never she would, not if I was careful enough.

I crept up to Ol’ Boil. On me tippy-tippy-toes, and ain’t that smart o’ me ’cause this away they won’t ’ear me comin’, will they?

That chair was smokin’.

So was Boil’s ’ead.

I peered real close into ’is eyeballs. They was mostly white with the light green middles tinier than usual and mixed with blue strands… like the strands o’ some sea creature, I’d say, but ain’t that silly? ’is tongue lolled. It was coated in white scum, and somethin’ gooey dripped off the tip and beaded up on ’is plaid jacket.

I watched the goo, *drip, drip, drip* it went. The jacket was studded with it, beads in formations on the plaid. Like ’ow people line up to get bread. I saw meself in every one o’ those little beads.

Starin’ back at me own self.

Hun’reds o’ me, black faces, swirlin’ now and cuttin’ all up into black-blue strands that slinked and twirled— *No, it couldn’t be!*

I clutched me face with both ’ands. Wrenched me ’ead back, ’eard the crazies—and they was laughin’ at me—and the fury rose in me, the anger, the one I can’t control. I stared back at the hun’reds o’ me splittin’ and whirlin’ in the drops that fell from Ol’ Boil’s tongue.

The Mean Fucker, the one with cruel eyes who’d adone in ’er own mum and ’er own five chil’ren, she came at me with ’er claws out. I screamed and batted at ’er, but she just laughed more, knife teeth black in ’er mouth, the claws rakin’ blood down me face.

She shook a lot, that Mean Fucker, and I couldn’t get ’old o’ ’er so easily, you see, and I grappled with ’er as she laughed.

Above, the ceilin’ split wide open and spilled its guts. Blood and tissue came thumpin’ down—big flabby organs, all bloody, and uncoiled brain and intestines. The crazies was screamin’, and so was I. And there be me men, only friends I ’ave.

’e Who Suck ’is Teeth.

’e Who Pull Out ’is Hair.

Suckin’.

Pullin’.

And me, screamin’ and screamin’!

Suck started shriekin’, “Dagon, mighty Dagon! Give me fishwoman! I be loyal! Give me fishwoman!”

Pull started shriekin’ like some crazy chorus.

“Dagon, mighty Dagon! We be loyal, *ghybhv’opth ’trimclkkk*!”

Oddly, they didn’t care that they was coated in blood and guts. But I am a civilized man, and I cared.

Claws on me face, and *teeth*!

Dagon, was ’e comin’, was this the time?

The room quivered. It *shook*.

The walls bulged inward, the crazies scrabbled for views o’ Ol’ Boil strapped in ’is chair, and here come Nurse Death with Jibber, and they be lookin’ at *me*.

I ’urled meself at Mean Fucker, and she went down right away, right under me, she did. I let loose on ’er face, that evil, evil face. The one with the knife-stab teeth. I beat ’er with me fist ’til ’er face was all smashed in and pulpy like them blood and guts fallin’ from the broken ceilin’.

I shrieked ’oly ’ell, I did, because I knew that Lord Dagon, ’e cometh—

Thy will be done.

Thy worshipers amass,

Thy worshipers do as you bid,

You bring us to the Great Ol’ One.

They pulled me offa ’er. Nurse Death wrenched me arms behind me back so ’ard me shoulder sockets ’urt, they did. Jibber stuck one o’ them black straps in me mouth. ’e tied it behind me ’ead. I groun’ me teeth down on it, but it did no good.

Me face got ’ot.

The tears rolled.

I thrashed and I beat on Jibber, and Nurse Death come at me with one o’ them big needles.

Drop o’ goo on the tip.

Drop fallin’ and beadin’ on me jacket.

A few streets o’er, the big machine thrashed with me.

Sharp pain in me neck. Nurse Death and ’er needle.

Me teeth ground ’arder into the restraint. I felt me eyes bulgin’.

I looked at Ol’ Boil. ’is tongue curled up. It disappeared into ’is mouth.

Self-satisfied bugger, thought ’e was better than me, did ’e? I struggled to break free from Death, but she’d already put the chains on me wrists and the lock was tight.

Boil’s thin lips twitched and rose a notch at the sides. ’e was laughin’ at me!

I wouldn’t ’ave it!

I kicked Death as ’ard as I could. I got ’er in the groin. She fell backward, smacked ’er ’ead on Boil’s chair.

Jibber’s face loomed, ’ard and cold and mean. ’is fist was big. It slammed into me cheek… right under the left eye.

The flabby organs and the blood sprayin’ out o’ the ceilin’ dimmed and turned to stars. Bright red stars. I reeled, and I fell. Choked on vomit. Saw blood, but it was me blood. Blood behind me eyes.

I gripped Jibber.

’e ’it me face again, this time with steel knuckles on ’is fist. As I went under, I ’eard only one word in me brain, and it bellowed o’er and o’er again in steady thrum: *Dagon… Dagon… Dagon*.

13

AMELIA SCARCLIFFE

Half Moon Bay, Dorset

“Will that be all, then, Mrs. Chatham?”

Cats wandered around the shop and rubbed the feet and legs of my visitor.

“I do so like foxgloves mixed with cuckooflowers. And the rosebay willowherb is divine today with the bloody crane’s-bill. Wonderful, isn’t it, how everything flowers here at the oddest times, and how very lush it is? Oh. Perhaps a wee bit of cowslip and round-headed rampions, too?”

She was certainly one of my best customers, came here so often I sometimes shared lunch and tea with her. I’d just brewed some black tea tinged with bergamot, and the fragrance mingled with the perfumes of my flowers. I put down my embroidery—kittens and flowers, of course—and asked Mrs. Chatham if she’d like a cup. As expected, she nodded eagerly.

“Yes, and do you have those sweet pastries I love?”

I smiled and nodded, moved the embroidery to the counter, and touched her shoulder. Dear Mrs. Chatham, portly and gray-haired in her modest blue-cloth dress with matching hat. The last of my own family had died long ago, and Mrs. Chatham was as close to a mother or grandmother as I had. Soft kind eyes. Weathered skin, patched with brown. The white powder on her face had caked into her wrinkles, making them stand out. I’m sure she didn’t know. Her eyesight was very poor these days.

Slipping into the back room, I returned moments later with a plate of pastries, then eased my best customer into the wooden chair by the mistletoe.

“You’re such a dear,” she said, taking a bite. Cream and burnt sugar smeared across her lips and crowned the tip of her nose.

I busied myself with the purple-white rampions and the yellow cowslips, thinking how lucky I was to be in good graces with Lord Mapleton—or *Richard*, as I thought of him late at night when I was squirming in bed unable to sleep. Richard would give me anything. He knew I was a faithful

and loyal follower. And there was no Lady Mapleton to mind the attention he gave to me. She had disappeared years ago. The rest of us always supposed that Richard had sent her to sea.

Without Richard, I'd have none of these beautiful flowers, so beloved by Mrs. Chatham. I'd be forced to move to London and sell whatever I could on the streets. I'd be destitute. But thanks to Richard, I lived in this lovely cottage overlooking Half Moon Bay. He supplied my flowers, grown in his hothouses and tended by his main man, Lantern-Jaw. Or so I called him. I never knew his real name.

I poked a cowslip into a clutch of rampion. The purple and white swirls of rampion were mottled with a darker blue-gray than usual. Bruised, they were, and I wondered if Lantern-Jaw had accidentally twisted them in his fists.

Mrs. Chatham plucked up another pastry. The mistletoe hanging behind her reached down, parasite that it was, and spread its branches over her head. This was what happened when I didn't feed it.

"Your kittens are lovely, dear. The ginger tabby is adorable. My old Sweetpea is ginger, too, but getting mangy, I fear." She thrust a hand at my embroidery, and pastry cream plopped to the floor.

The tongues of mistletoe leaves ached for her. They strained on their bony footstalks. The blood-plumped berries bulged, also straining to reach. The root threads, starved of soft bark for so long, knit into a mat with proboscises dangling like needles all along the edges.

With her flowers ready, I swept aside the curtain and peered outside. The clouds were dark and heavy, like lumps of lead, and they shed a fine mist that clung to the ivy and mistletoe that were suffocating the trees.

"I hope to finish the embroidery by Christmas," I said, casting her a smile, "and I'll give it to you, how's that? Just for you and Sweetpea."

Briefly, I turned, and her face brightened. She pushed the last bit of pastry into her mouth and wiped her hands on the cloth I kept on the counter. I used that cloth to wipe up moisture but also to dab leaves with sustenance. Now I'd have to get another cloth from the back room. It wouldn't do to wipe cream on crane's-bill and rosebay willowherb.

They might die, mightn't they?

"You are the kindest soul I know," she said. "Now let me gather my things, pay for the lovely flowers, and be on my way. I'm sure you have more to do than sit here and listen to me."

Kindest soul I know.

Pay for the lovely flowers…

Sweetpea.

Who did she think she was fooling?

Dimwit.

I returned to the window and gazed again at my fellow worshipers. All the way down the mountain, the trees huddled together, cringing beneath the lead sky. So thick were the trees that not a dot of flower could be seen.

But I knew where the flowers hid.

The sea spleenwort poked from the gray cliffs that jutted over the bay. The rough hair of the sea stork's-bill lay waiting to strike at my ankles. Its flowers were the palest pink and poked obscenely from the hairy stems. The fruit, sharp and long like a beak, jabbed and drew blood. Down below, on the rocky beach, the sea stork's-bill sprawled in tangled vines, beaks jabbing, hair sticky.

The autumn lady's tresses would be out now, green pointy spirals like iron spikes, the type barbarians used for their enemies' heads. The mistletoe extracted the nourishment it needed from the trees. It was a parasite, sucking all of its sustenance from its hosts. This is how the thready roots grew into thick wood.

"Well, you seem to be in no hurry," Mrs. Chatham said.

"I suppose I can stay and chat. Do you have more of these delightful pastries, dear, and another spot of tea?" Her voice was chirpy, high and shrill.

I snapped back to attention, annoyed at the interruption.

I'd had enough of the old fool.

Her hat was askew. Tea had splattered across the blue bodice of her dress, and I could tell that her feet struggled to escape from the grip of her shoes. The faint smell of perspiration drifted from her as salt drifts in sea air. Yet the perspiration was stale and fetid. She'd attempted, unsuccessfully, to mask her stink with lavender.

Her white-caked wrinkles were deeply grooved, like tributaries carved into a gray landscape. She was loathsome.

Richard had warned me about her.

All flowers and prettiness on the outside, he'd said, *but a stench underneath*. A scourge of a smell, indeed it was, a scourge that hurt more than Koos's lashings on the slab of open waters.

I grabbed her elbow and yanked her up. Her mouth popped open with surprise, and the cup dropped along with the saucer, splashing tea down the front of her dress. The flowers on the counter lay limp. They frowned at her. They knew she was an abomination. They knew the mistletoe demanded blood, that it would have its way, that it *must* have its way… surely so, if the world was to continue waiting and remaining fertile for Those Who Would Come.

"What are you doing?" Wobbling on her feet now, my hand firmly upon her elbow, she started babbling at me. "How *dare* you? What's gotten into you? Have you gone mad?"

Her voice was shrill, but I hardly heard the words. They were dim beneath the howl of the woods.

The mistletoe descended. The root mat clamped to her skull. The proboscises drove into her flesh, and she screamed, but I barely heard that, either.

I let myself smile.

Sweetpea, I thought. *Sweetpea*.

Nothing was "sweet" in this world. Nothing was lovely. Nothing was held dear. This world was empty. Devoid of soul. This world was a mistake, deprived eons ago of Those Who Mattered. They'd fled to the nether reaches, deep below the seas, way up beyond the clouds. They had fled the sickness, the *scourge*, that was mankind. And we, stupid, stupid people, we thought nothing mattered but us.

Mrs. Chatham's body twitched violently. Her hands spasmed, arms rigid and outstretched. Her feet threatened to crumble beneath her. Ankles wobbled, feet no longer struggling. Fat legs limp. Eyes lolling, engorged with blood, filling like a whirlpool in spring. Nose dripping. White-cake powder a thick paste on her forehead and cheeks. Mouth open, brown teeth exposed, crumbs and cream on them.

And still, I held her tightly.

Lord Dagon.

I do your will.

Lord Dagon, give me a mate. Let me do your bidding. Give me Lord Mapleton, Richard. *Let us breed for you. It is the final step*.

Hundreds of needles drilled into her scalp. Blood dotted across her forehead, the white-cake paste tinged pink and dripping into her eyes,

merging with the whirlpools. Blood matting her hair, coursing down the strands, soaking into the blue cloth of her dress.

The flowers twinkled upon the counter. Pinks and yellows and light blues. The tinge of blood mingling with the perfumes of bergamot and flower. Heady, it was. *Heady!* I laughed so hard I cried, and my stomach hurt. My hands dropped to my sides and I staggered back from Mrs. Chatham. There was no further need to hold her beneath the mistletoe.

Tiny rips appeared in the air suffused with fragrances of unknown flowers. Tiny rips that writhed like snakes in glorious colors I'd never seen. Tiny rips of glee.

She fell, limp, to the floor. In doing so, she knocked the kitten embroidery off the counter. It was slick with blood and brains. It landed on her heart.

The air crackled.

It was a sign. Richard would be happy. The time was coming. We'd all be saved from this wretched existence. At long last, the world would be in harmony.

Peace, love, and harmony. Christmas. Flowers for the table.

Indeed. *Flowers*.

What was Mrs. Chatham doing on the floor?

Who would take care of her mangy old cat?

How would I finish the embroidery by Christmas? She had ruined it with her bloody accident.

The mistletoe cap hung, bloody and dripping with brain matter and gray hair. The cap hung.

The air snakes writhed.

The broom was nearby, but it wouldn't do, not for this mess. So I got my mop from the back, and I filled the bucket with soap and water.

Customers might come, one never knew. I'd have to brew more tea. She'd eaten so many of my pastries, I'd have to bake more, but that could wait until the morning. For now, I had to mop the floor and dispose of the mess.

I shivered.

What if Richard stopped by? What if Lord Dagon finally sent him to me? What if Richard finally chose me and we mated for Lord Dagon? I would be nothing short of royalty. All would bow down to me at Half Moon Bay,

and we would drift into the sea, where the coral bloomed more beautiful than any flower on earth.

14

DR. JOHN WATSON

Avebury, Wiltshire

“Think of it as a short holiday in the countryside. Woods, beautiful scenery, and quaint farmhouses.”

He said it ironically. Holmes hated holidays, even short ones. He loathed the very notion of stewing in a quaint inn or cottage anywhere in the English countryside. Even a single day of doing nothing bored him so thoroughly that he itched for his needle.

A carriage wheel jolted off a rock in the road, and both he and I bounced up from the hard cushion seat. Holmes almost hit his head on the roof of the carriage, but merely chuckled.

“An adventure, dear fellow.” His brow furrowed. “And quite necessary. This time, we will examine what’s left of the corpse. Amos Beiler’s corpse.”

“How do you propose to do that?” I queried. “The police made Kristoffer bury his body more than a week ago.”

“So they did, Watson, but in their haste, they likely didn’t tamper with the remains in any way.” His eyes flashed at the prospect.

“Are you suggesting we dig up the poor fellow’s body?” I was appalled. “I will take no part in grave robbing, Holmes, even for you.”

He chuckled and his eyes flickered momentarily, then closed halfway. He peered at me through the slits.

“I assure you that we will rob no grave, Doctor.”

“Then—?”

The carriage lurched again, throwing me against Holmes’s shoulder. The vehicle slammed back down to the dirt, and I fell off Holmes, my right arm smashing against the carriage door. Holmes held the seat with both hands.

“It’s the wind,” he said, looking out, “and it will only get worse. The roads are rough in these parts, and cold.” He glanced back at me. “Tell me, what do you make of Lestrade’s message? Now that you’ve had some time

to think on it.” Holmes steadied himself, reached into an inner pocket, and handed me the Inspector’s note, which he’d sent by courier to Baker Street.

Indeed, Holmes and I had discussed the note briefly during our journey to the outskirts of Avebury, where Kristoffer Beiler was tending his tiny family farm again. I could only hope that the young Beiler was *only* tending the farm, and not constructing more of the unusual Beiler furniture. The way the wind was whipping, if Kristoffer Beiler had any sense, he’d be huddled inside by the fireplace.

I blew on my fingers to warm them, and took Lestrade’s note from Holmes.

> URGENT
>
> We’ve tried everything, Mr. Holmes. Engineers failed. Machinists failed. I sent in ten men with axes, cleavers, and hammers. We attempted to tear down the Jacobs tram machine. Failure.
>
> Two of my men were killed as they chopped at low-hanging pipes and cables. Also tried feeding machine water, wood, other things. The power surged. Pipes fell. The remaining men escaped.
>
> As we ran, one man screamed that the machine had grown several new limbs that fell and nearly killed another. My man insisted that these new limbs, these pipes, were definitely not present when we first arrived.
>
> Please come as soon as you can.

I wasn’t sure how steam power might surge, for I lacked knowledge concerning such modern mechanisms. Having witnessed the horror of the machine, firsthand, I felt terrible about Lestrade’s men and how they died. From years of working with Holmes on his cases, I’d had my fair share of encounters with Scotland Yard’s finest, and hated to think of any of them being crushed by heavy iron. I could only imagine the effect it had on Lestrade.

“The machine is dangerous, Holmes. We’ve established that,” I said. “We don’t know how the elder Jacobs built it, but clearly, the construction is intricate.” At the time of our encounter with the machine, my imagination had gone wild, and I’d been inclined to attribute human traits to a mechanical construct. The more time passed, the more reason took hold, and now I realized how absurd that had been.

Holmes was a logical man. This was, if anything, his chief attribute. He wasn't the type to believe in superstition or nonsense. As for Lestrade, he'd never been anything short of a realist. He wasn't the type to indulge in frivolous or idle discussion. Direct and to the point, that was Lestrade, though his intellect didn't come close to rivaling Holmes.

"Perhaps the man was drunk," I suggested. "Or perhaps what he saw was a blur from the sun, coming in through a broken window."

"Drink doesn't make a man see a machine grow limbs," Holmes answered, straight and to the point. "The sun wasn't out in London that day—it was foggy and overcast." I could tell by his sharp gaze that he wasn't going to let the subject drop.

"Then perhaps Lestrade's man was exhausted from the physical ordeal of hacking away at a giant metal monster. Perhaps he hadn't eaten that morning, and was dizzy. Perhaps the lighting in the building was dim, and he thought he saw movement where there was none. Perhaps—"

"You miss the obvious, Watson."

I considered that for a moment.

"That the machine actually *grew*? But Holmes…" Such supposition wasn't like him at all. I didn't know what else to say.

At that moment, the carriage jerked to a halt. Before us stood a rustic barn and a small house. Carved in the wooden frame of the barn was the word, *BEILER*.

Holmes paid the driver, a man more skeleton than flesh, and gave instructions to return at a specific time. Then he turned to me.

"You must see beneath the surface, Watson. Only facts matter. Lestrade is a professional observer. A man of limited deductive powers, I admit, but still, one of Scotland Yard's finest. He also has some egotism, and wants to cover himself—in fact, that he sent me this note at all means he wants me to know that the machine may have 'grown new limbs,' as he puts it.

"Now, how does a machine grow, Watson?"

"Well, it doesn't," I said. "That's preposterous."

Holmes pulled a metal tube from his coat pocket. It was his spyglass. Firmly grasping one end, he pushed the other end outward. The tube expanded, segment by segment, until the spyglass was at full length. He held it in front of me, and I understood.

"Perhaps one of the men accidentally pressed a button," I offered, "or tripped a mechanism that expanded the metal contraption outward, just like

your spyglass."

"Precisely," he said. "That's certainly *one* theory. Axes were used. Hammers. Who knows *what* carnage their heavy-handed procedures may have instigated." He stopped and peered at me. "If we examine the machine in detail, we'll learn the truth. We'll look for accordion-like mechanisms whereby the machine expands and contracts. Think of springs, Watson, with boxing gloves on the ends. Springs on trampolines. There are any number of explanations for Lestrade's note."

His eyes twinkled. "On the other hand, perhaps the man simply *was* drunk."

We walked over the hard ground, trying our best to avoid the thorny weeds that constituted the only vegetation between the road and the barn. The structure itself leaned precariously, as if the left side had sunk several feet into the ground. Iron spouts shaped like gargoyles tinged green by time and weather dotted the top perimeter of the building. Empty birds' nests fringed the gargoyle heads like hair.

I mentioned Mary's suggestion about Irish bombers being involved in the crimes we were investigating, but Holmes dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand.

"Pray, Watson, don't be foolish," he said. "We've found no bombs, and while the Irish gangs have been terrorizing London for years, none of their crimes remotely resembles the Beiler and Jacobs murders. Moreover, no Irish gang has claimed credit for what has happened. If someone had managed to build such an unstoppable device, he surely would have proclaimed it with the intent of intimidating the government."

His comment made me pause. "Tell me, Holmes, why haven't you tackled the bombings, and resolved them for Lestrade?"

He scowled at me.

"Surely you know the answer to that one, dear fellow. I don't investigate the mundane, the trivial, the boring. I leave all but the most esoteric crimes to Scotland Yard."

"True enough," I answered, "but think of the lives you'd be saving."

"One man cannot do it all, Watson. I must pick my cases carefully to put my mind to its best use. I must pick cases that nobody else can solve—cases such as this one."

Even as he said it, I wondered if Holmes had met his match, for surely this was the oddest case we'd ever encountered.

The wind howled from the north. I pulled my coat tighter and hitched my scarf up to cover the lower part of my face. Clouds, blackish-red like the scabs on Jacobs's nose, skittered across the sky, the wounds breaking and dumping rain. Holmes raced toward the barn, and I dashed as quickly as possible behind him. My injured leg cramped, and I froze, waiting for the muscles to loosen. By the time I reached the open barn door, I was soaked.

Holmes had disappeared into the gloom.

There was a clatter of metal, a curse, and a light flickered on, illuminating Holmes's face, pinched in pain. He held up a long white-tipped match and surveyed the room. Then quickly, he lit the several wall sconces and blew out the match.

I wrinkled my nose. *Phosphorus*.

My first impression of the structure was of its massive strength. The posts extending from the rough-hewn floor to the domed ceiling were nearly as wide as my height. Each had been cut from a single length of timber. Hundreds of wooden slats formed a half-moon shape of ceiling set inside a more regularly shaped roof. Planks inset with large polished stones formed the walls. Scarred wooden tables rested beneath the sconces, and upon the surfaces, tools of all sizes and dimensions lay scattered.

"Careful, Watson!" Holmes suddenly cried.

He pointed to the floor in front of me. I was about to step forward, but instead, set my boot back down in place, staring where Holmes had indicated. Dark stains splotched the weathered planks. In fact, large splotches bloomed on the floor in at least ten distinct locations with equally dark splatters between them.

Blood, I realized. *Amos Beiler's blood*.

It was garish and horrifying all at once, like a battle scene without the bodies. Such an atrocity. My mind could hardly fathom the depravity of a man capable of such violence. For how long, I wondered, had Beiler been alive during the ordeal?

"All has been removed," Holmes said. "The remains, the stacks of bones, and the odd spheres."

"Gold?"

"None was found."

I've never been superstitious. I don't believe in ghosts, ghouls, and witches. I'm unafraid of walking under ladders. When I was a little boy,

shadows in the night didn’t scare me. As far as I was concerned, the most frightening thing on earth was evil in the heart of a human being.

Someone was playing tricks on us, I felt certain of it. But it eluded me why a killer would strike so many times in Whitechapel and then journey so far out into the hinterlands to kill Amos Beiler.

There were several chairs situated around the work space, and Holmes examined some of them using his magnifying lens. One was particularly grotesque, and I assumed it was the one the elder Beiler had been constructing when he was killed. Holmes kept his gloves on the entire time, and I did the same.

“No point leaving our fingerprints anywhere,” he said. “The police may not notice them, but I prefer not to take chances. Nor do I want to disturb any clues that might be found.”

“Fingerprinting is ancient,” I commented absently. “I’ve read that the Tang dynasty in eighth-century China used them on contracts.”

“I’m aware,” Holmes narrowed his eyes. “Did you also know that in the first century, a bloody handprint kept a blind man from Rome’s death squad? He was accused of killing his mother.”

“Yes, we must have read the same account,” I replied. “His lawyer, Quintilianus, was able to establish that the handprint belonged to someone else. The blind fellow had been framed.”

“In some ways, the criminal mind never changes, does it?” Holmes said. “I think fingerprints will soon become vital clues for our own police, Watson. It won’t be long before they catch up with modern science. Though they certainly *do* take their time.” It was a common refrain with Holmes, the slow evolution of police work compared to his own.

“It is more than ten years since Henry Faulds established in Tokyo that detectives can dust for fingerprints—even those that seem invisible—and expose them,” he continued. “His method was used to catch a thief and save an innocent man who had been accused of the crime.” He chuckled. “If the police had listened to William Herschel in 1877, we’d already be using fingerprints as evidence.”

I’d heard about Herschel. A British official in India, he’d requested the handprints and fingerprints of his business associates. After twenty years of study, Herschel declared that each person had unique line patterns on his fingers. The authorities laughed him off.

Holmes squatted and examined the blood splatterings, the stains, and the sawdust.

“What do you think of this, over here by the bizarre chair?”

Gingerly, I stepped around the blood splatters and made my way over to where he stood. The chair was off-kilter— just like the shape of the barn— but for now, I turned my attention to the floor where Holmes pointed.

The stain there was the diameter of an average man’s height. It was solid in the center, and from there splattered outward as a star twinkles.

“He was hacked down where he stood,” I suggested.

“But look at the dimensions of the bloodstain, Watson.”

I tried to puzzle through it as Holmes might. God knows I’d seen enough corpses and bloodstains in my life. I ran through various ideas.

Was he knifed from behind? There wouldn’t be this much blood, and it would have welled beneath the body and oozed, not fanned out like a star.

An axe to the heart? No, the blood would have spurted from Amos’s chest to the floor and soaked his clothes. He would have fallen backward. The stain would be a large splotch, thinner trails.

An axe to the head? Blood would have flowed from the skull…

“Have you ever seen such a stain, Watson?” Holmes asked. “And notice, as young Kristoffer told us, not a dot of blood rests upon any of his father’s tools. Where is the murder weapon? Where is the trail of bloody footprints? How did the killer leave this place?”

“I haven’t a clue as to any of it, I’m afraid.” My eyes wandered back to the bizarre chair of odd dimensions.

“The blow came from *above*. That much is obvious from the pattern of blood where the luckless chap fell. As for the rest, there is much that remains unanswered,” Holmes said. He plucked up a bit of mud and put it into a cloth wrap, which he tucked into his pocket. He also found a smashed pair of spectacles that the elder Beiler must have been wearing when he was murdered.

“I see no papers on the floor or tables, Watson. No evidence of whatever Amos Beiler had been reading. The book his son spoke of must be in the house. We’ll check there, but first—”

He leaned in close to the absurd chair. We both tried to make sense of the bas relief and the etchings. There were mathematical symbols, as well as designs I didn’t recognize— whirls and curls, spirals, leaf prints, and even stranger, fossilized creatures embedded into the arms and seat.

The chair itself was a marvel of craftsmanship, well joined and polished to a high shine. Mortise-and-tenon joints, blind mitered dovetails, offset L joints, jigged edge laps, box joints. Holmes identified them all, much to my surprise. As far as I knew, he'd never touched a saw, a chisel, a slick, or a mortise—he was not a furniture maker, at any rate.

"I read, I learn," he'd told me countless times.

The storm had abated somewhat, and so we left the barn to find Kristoffer Beiler. The earth was softer, the weeds bristling, thorns extended, the tips glistening with moisture.

"So much for footprints," Holmes said. "We will find nothing here." He turned and gazed at the roof of the barn. "No sign of disturbance. Everything intact."

"The killer must have entered via the door, just as we did," I commented. "There appears to be no way into the barn from the roof, and there are no windows, no other doors."

"Indeed, dear fellow, and yet remember the puzzle of Jacobs's machine, how the pipes could have retracted and then telescoped outward again. Remember the odd shapes and positions of the bloodstains. Remember the odd double nature of the ceiling of this barn."

"But blast it all, man, what am I to deduce?" I demanded, becoming exasperated.

We stopped before the farmhouse, a tottering old building that made the barn look modern. Weather-beaten siding that needed a fresh coat of paint, and badly. Grimy windows. Chimney billowing smoke, thatched roof dripping with mold.

Overhead, the gray clouds surged, jots of lightning sparking between them as they drifted.

"Neither ceiling is what it seems," he responded. "As the spyglass changes shape, so might these ceilings—at both the Jacobs building and the Beiler barn. A snake sheds its skin. A chameleon changes its colors. Not everything we see is what it truly *is*, Watson. The bloodstains imply that our killer attacked Amos Beiler from above. Perhaps he did, indeed, enter via the roof. We just don't know—*yet*—how he did it."

"Perhaps Kristoffer Beiler can tell us if and how that ceiling moves," I said.

"Let's find out, shall we?"

Holmes rapped twice, and boots scuffled across wood. The door creaked open. Kristoffer Beiler blinked as one might blink on a sunny day at high noon. He shielded his eyes.

“What? Who—?” He squinted further. “Oh, you, Mr. Holmes, and Dr. Watson. What are you doing here?”

“May we, sir?” Holmes bowed, and Kristoffer opened the door wide so we could enter. He laid our wet coats and hats on an ornately carved bench by the door, then led us into his sitting room.

Holes riddled the thin rug, a dreary color somewhere between overcast London and the muddy skies of rural Avebury. The candles were nubs. Around the fireplace, several richly colored paintings hung on the graying wood-plank walls. I recognized the subjects of the paintings. Professor Henry Fitzgerald had a similar set.

The colors caught the light at odd angles and reflected back fully fleshed images that were not otherwise visible. Multi-limbed creatures stared at me, and some grasped unknown tools and weapons in their… appendages. Some had sunken faces. Others had giant warts, and were green.

What was most remarkable about the room, of course, was the furniture. There was a two-person settee in blonde wood polished to a sheen, naked of cushions or pillows, carved to fit the human body. The blonde arms, legs, and entire back were etched with symbols that had been burned into my brain, while others I didn’t recognize at all.

Several chairs, tables, and chests adorned the rest of the room, and as a beautiful girl might catch my eye, so each piece clamored for my attention. Intricate joints secured the wood. Wrapped like boa constrictors around the arms and legs of each object, etched spirals pulsed. They were of such delicacy that again I was reminded of exotic beauties, this time bound exquisitely for the adoring eye.

The drawers and the chests swelled and emitted a perfume that I would avoid describing but for the sake of accuracy— the scent of a woman up close. I take some pride in my self-control and sense of decency, yet the furniture affected me such that I had to force myself to stop staring at it.

Instead, I looked at Holmes. He stood back, one hand on his hip, the other cupping his chin. His usual pallor was tinged pink.

“Look at the joints that hold the wood together,” he said.

“Exotic, to say the least,” I commented as lightly as I could.

“Yes… some in the shapes of butterflies, others in the shapes of ocean creatures. And look at the hinges on that chest, Watson. Jellyfish with long tendrils and flat-eyed stares.”

“That’s not at all what I see!” I exclaimed.

“Then, what?”

“Why, I…” Flustered, I returned my gaze to the drawers of a chest. The swells were indeed the bodies of jellyfish. Tendrils held together the sections of the drawers. The jellyfish with their flat eyes stared back at me. There was no perfume in the room, only the mildew and mold of the old farmhouse.

Kristoffer Beiler’s face twitched. He held onto the mantel to steady himself. In the dim firelight, the eyes of his loggerheads shone like a cat’s eyes in the night.

I also grabbed the mantel to steady myself. There was something about the room that wasn’t quite right. I’m not the type of man who has visions. I’m a steady man, sure of myself, and yet I know what I saw, and I know what I smelled.

I was shaken to the core.

Kristoffer broke into my thoughts.

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

“Whorls within whorls, eyes within eyes.” Holmes arranged himself on the settee and studied the armrest. He gazed at Kristoffer, who trembled and looked away, prompting Holmes to change the subject. A brief smile,

and he said, “I’ve arranged for rooms at a nearby inn, the Loggerheads, I believe it’s called.”

“The Loggerheads!” the boy cried. “I fear for your safety, sir. Please tell me you’re not staying *there*!”

“But why?” Holmes asked. “What could possibly happen to us at a local inn?”

I attributed Kristoffer’s nerves to the unsolved murder of his father and to his loneliness living in rural Avebury, where by his own account the townsfolk feared his family and kept their distance.

“The Loggerheads will treat you well, but beware. *Ebb’yuh dissoth’nknpflknghreet*. Should you hear the shrieking in the elder language, whatever you do, don’t leave your room to investigate. You could die!”

I tried to calm the fellow down as best as I could, assuring him that Holmes and I would remain in our rooms all night. At this, he relaxed a bit.

After a moment, Holmes asked to see Amos Beiler's bed chamber, and with great hesitation, the boy agreed.

The room was dark, lit only by the candle the boy carried. Holmes's attention went immediately to a heavy book on the nightstand.

"You must wear the special gloves," Kristoffer said. He opened a drawer on his father's nightstand and plucked out a pair made from black leather. Holmes donned the gloves and examined the book, which was bound in animal hide and strung together with sinew down the side.

I peered over his shoulder. The book consisted of hundreds of pages of yellowed hide inked in dark maroon—perhaps the mystery ink from the scrap Holmes had rescued. As he flipped the pages, I saw strings of weird symbols much like those found on the spherical bones and littered across the Beiler chairs and tables.

"Watson?" Holmes placed the book on the nightstand.

Without hesitation I lifted the book, doubling over from the weight then straightening up again. Not only was the book grotesquely heavy, its animal hide cover had a greasy feel to it.

My fingers started to tingle, and then they grew hot. I nearly dropped the book, but held steady. As I did so, my fingers grew numb, and yet I still didn't drop the book. Rather, it seemed glued to my hands. Despite my best efforts, I could *not* drop it.

"Blast it all, Holmes, take this book off me!"

Still wearing the special gloves, he wrenched the book from my hands, and I staggered back. The book had ripped flesh from my fingers. Not much, but enough to terrify me.

"Most peculiar," Holmes said softly.

"This is not a book to fool with," Kristoffer said. "My father kept the separate page inside. Do not lose it. These are the ancient instructions for the table, chest, and chair of Beiler dimensions."

"And from whom did you receive this bizarre book?" Holmes asked.

"It was passed down through the generations. It is the Beiler copy of the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*."

I raised an eyebrow, as did Holmes. How odd to hear *Dagonite Auctoritatem* roll so easily off Kristoffer's tongue.

He must have noticed our reaction.

"My father made me memorize the name of that book before I knew my own name," he explained. "Beilers are shunned by the townsfolk on

account of the *Dagonite Auctoritatem* and the Beiler dimensions. They say God is getting retribution on us. My father isn't the first to be killed."

Holmes's eyes shot from the book back to the boy.

"Who else has been killed?" he asked sharply. Instead of answering, Kristoffer became increasingly agitated.

"What my father told me, and my grandfather before him, was to beware. We were cursed for centuries on account of some sin we don't know. Maybe the killer will come for me next! Maybe he'll slaughter me in my sleep this very night. I beg you, please help me, Mr. Holmes!"

"Mr. Beiler, you are not cursed for some unknown sin from centuries past," my friend said. "This is a preposterous notion. Do not believe in superstition, I urge you, sir. Let logic rule your thoughts. You will sleep much better at night." Holmes rolled his scarf around the Beiler *Auctoritatem* and tucked it beneath his arm.

"I will do all that I can, this I promise," he told Kristoffer. "I will find this madman you fear. He is of *this* world, Mr. Beiler. But now, the Doctor and I must take our leave. If we are to protect you from—" He didn't finish the sentence.

"From… from *what*?" the boy cried, wide-eyed.

Holmes cast me a look as if to say he regretted opening up this line of thought.

"In all honesty, sir, you are hated by everyone around you. Someone murdered your father. I don't want you to be next."

15

The wind thrashed the black clouds, which threatened to rupture above us. Any moment, and the night would drown in the same bleak storm that had drenched the day. Holmes and I had changed from our wet trousers and jackets into dry attire—*Wear all black, Watson,* he had told me, *to fade into the night*.

I dressed the cuts on my hands with ointment and bandages. The superficial wounds would heal soon, I knew, but for now, it was best to be safe.

“Come, Watson, we haven’t much time,” Holmes said.

I pulled on a soft pair of black gloves.

“We are *not* robbing Amos Beiler’s grave,” I said.

“No robbing of the grave,” he promised.

“Then what?”

“I need only a few specimens.”

“How many specimens does one have to take before it’s called grave robbing?” I asked.

“It may be a dangerous outing, beyond the pale of the law,” Holmes said, pulling on his own gloves, “but I assure you, dear fellow, that I won’t take much and that it certainly won’t—in my estimation—constitute grave robbing.”

“In your estimation, perhaps,” I replied, “but in the eyes of the law, as you say?”

“Lawmakers may think differently, but then, they never think like Sherlock Holmes, do they?”

“You’re using circular logic, trying to confuse me.”

“Stop quibbling with me, Watson. We must get to the cemetery, and we must be quick about it.”

It was already late evening when we left the Loggerheads. The wind snapped, a portent of the night’s storm, and I pulled my scarf tightly around my neck. My injured leg ached from the dampness and cold. It often flared with pain, but I had become adept at hiding my discomfort. I didn’t want any sympathy—the awkward stares people give to the chronically ill or injured.

Holmes slowed his pace, but kindly did not mention my limp. I took the opportunity to make my point.

“Just because Holmes is almost always right, and the lawmen are almost always wrong, it does not lead to the conclusion that Holmes can steal from graves without breaking the law.”

A few people scurried past, heading home for a late supper. Their heels clicked on the cobblestones and quickly receded into the wind. Heads ducked, all of them, against the gale. No one would remember two men in dark clothes wearing workmen’s caps.

Holmes didn’t answer until, far ahead of us, the mist engulfed the passers-by, and they disappeared.

“You’re wasting valuable time, Doctor. If you don’t stop nattering like a market woman, I will do something far worse to attract the attention of the law.”

I must have looked shocked, for he quickly burst out laughing. Then he grabbed my arm and hurried me along. He knew that I’d follow him anywhere, into any battle or scrape with either outlaws or the law. We were comrades, Holmes and I.

I remembered the loyalty of Murray, my orderly during the war, who had helped me countless times at great risk to himself. He’d carried me to safety after the Jezail bullet struck me on the battlefield.

As Murray was to me, so I was to Holmes.

Much more was at stake here than a few stacks of bones. Lives hung in the balance. People had died—been killed— and if Holmes and I didn’t find the killer, more would follow. For all I knew, the killer was stalking new prey tonight, might already have lured a new victim into an alley. Slit another throat, gutted another victim.

Stacked the bones.

I limped after Holmes down the dark street. Mist swirled around my ankles, prickling me with cold. I kept close to my friend, not wanting to lose him. On a night like this, the mist could rise and suffocate everything, obscure a man only feet in front of me.

My mind drifted to Kristoffer Beiler’s warnings about the Loggerheads. I’d seen nothing at the inn to suggest death was imminent. Mrs. Hinds, the woman who ran the place, had given us keys and led us to our room.

“It is the only room left,” she had said. “Peak of the season, but I’ll give you a good price.” Elderly, hunched over and with a cane, she posed no

threat other than to our wallets. When she smiled, it was toothless and her eyes didn't light up. When she wasn't smiling, she sucked her lips between her gums and grunted. She smelled faintly of stale beer and cleansers.

I frankly couldn't imagine Mrs. Hinds shrieking weird incantations in the middle of the night or plunging knives into her sleeping lodgers. Young Kristoffer's imagination was running wild, probably ignited by the gruesome death of his father.

We paused by a large oak whose branches whipped in frenzy above us. Before us was the cemetery. It stretched into the mist behind a church and abutted a field dotted with huge stones. My heart tightened. A wave of fear swept down my body. I glanced at Holmes. His eyes glittered as he surveyed the burial ground.

He unlatched the black iron gate and stepped onto a path of moss-slimed rocks, the mist curling into the crevasses between the stones. I followed, still nursing my leg. It ached with every step, and I needed to be steady, for the rocks were slick and dangerous.

At the end of the path, the cemetery spread before us. The gravestones seemed to tremble with the thunder. Before I knew it, Holmes was far ahead of me, studying the names upon the graves as he went.

A blast of thunder, and I jumped. The ground shook as if trembling with me. Around me, shadows loomed within the shadows.

"Over here!" Holmes yelled over a blast of wind. I thought I saw his arm motioning, but it was hard to tell. Branches slashed at me, and instinctively I threw my right arm up, shielding my face.

I lowered my arm and grasped a gravestone, lurched forward, and moved from gravestone to gravestone in this manner, stumbling over slimy rock and soft earth. In my left hand, I held one of Holmes's satchels. It was empty. He had the other and was already crouching at the nether side of the cemetery.

I grasped the last of the stone crosses that marked the Christian section. Beyond that, where the weeds were thick as bushes, the space was reserved for the derelict, the diseased, and all those deemed unworthy of Christian burial. This was the poor souls section, and this was where we would find Amos Beiler's remains.

Only one spot was devoid of weeds and freshly turned. It was the spot where Holmes crouched, pawing the ground with both hands.

"Amos Beiler is here," he yelled, "in this unmarked mound!"

“But this is much smaller than a grave, Holmes!” I yelled, trying to keep my balance.

“Yes, because they didn’t allow Kristoffer a coffin.” He paused. “Note the tiny stone set in the old mound beside this one. ‘Amelia Tookey Terwoort Beiler.’ Interesting, wouldn’t you say? Possibly, it was his mother, for her grave is set beside his father’s. And now we shall unearth this poor man’s remains!” He nodded at my satchel, which I’d tossed to the ground and secured with my feet. “We shall put our samples into your satchel, Watson. Mine contains the equipment necessary for our endeavor.”

He handed me a small shovel and we began to dig.

Lightning flashed and illuminated Holmes’s face. How could I describe it? Excited, intrigued, perplexed. At his happiest. He was in the throes of the chase, with a great problem to solve, and nothing thrilled him more.

Abruptly he held his shovel up so I could see what was heaped upon it. Coils of intestine, a slab of brain. I staggered from the smell.

“Ha!” Holmes cried. “At last, intact samples! We must study them, Watson, and learn all that they have to tell us.” He dumped his find into the satchel and dug further, unearthing more of the same.

My shovel sliced through soft earth and hit something hard like rock, but I knew better. This was no rock. The shovel broke past. I had uncovered Amos Beiler’s bones.

The thunder cracked, and as the ground shook, I nearly fell, my wounded leg aching and going numb. I regained my footing, rammed the shovel back into the earth, and scooped up several small bones coated in muck. It took both of us to unearth a couple of the larger bones, and then Holmes waved his hand before him, indicating that he wanted me to halt, which I gladly did.

I straightened up and stretched my back. The stench of Beiler’s remains was nauseating, and my stomach lurched. Unbidden, I remembered seeing a sign at the inn. They were serving “Mum’s Meat Soup” until midnight.

“Get these larger bones into your bag,” Holmes instructed, thankfully interrupting my train of thought, “then let’s get back to our lodgings, shall we?” He didn’t have to ask twice. I made rapid work of it, and then we clawed our way from one gravestone to the next until we reached the black iron gate.

“We have a long night ahead of us,” my companion said. “It’ll be morning before we’re through. Don’t expect to get any sleep tonight,

Watson.”

“A warm bath?”

He *tsked*.

“A bite to eat?” I said. “A pint?”

“Really, Doctor. You test my patience. We have no time for such trifles.”

“I shall simply have food and drink sent to our room. You can eat while you think.”

“Trifles,” he muttered. “Sometimes, dear fellow, you’re as bad as Mrs. Hudson.”

And you, I thought, *are a grave robber*.

16

Indeed, “Mum’s Meat Soup” could have been cooked by the Queen’s private chef, and I would have had no appetite for it.

Holmes spread Amos Beiler’s intestines, chunks of flesh—including brain, and bones on several large metal trays borrowed from the inn’s kitchen. I use the word “borrowed” liberally, since Mrs. Hinds was unaware that we’d appropriated her kitchenware for our own purposes.

The room reeked of Amos Beiler’s remains.

“You were right, Holmes.”

“About what?” He looked up from the floor, where he hunched over one of the silver trays. A pyramid of pulpy coils, blackened and teeming with insects, jiggled as Holmes prodded it with the tip of a butter knife, also borrowed from Mrs. Hinds’s kitchen.

“There’ll be no food tonight.”

I pulled off my filthy shoes and tossed them onto Holmes’s shoes by the door, a scarred wooden slab that looked as if someone had taken an axe to it. The warped floor sloped toward the center of the room, and a raw wood slab kept the dressing table from falling forward onto Holmes’s shoulders.

Mrs. Hinds had draped rags in front of the window, which reminded me of the landlady herself, hunched and withered. The room contained two cots, each about a foot shorter than my body and so narrow that only a thin or moderately sized man could sleep without falling onto the floor. A blanket, scratchy as a rat and moth-eaten, adorned each cot. Wallpaper sketched with flowers of the dark ages drooped off the walls, revealing black-mold powder that had once been wood. I wondered how the walls remained standing.

“It’s a clue, Watson, but to what?” Holmes exclaimed, and I realized that I’d not been paying attention to his travail.

I sat on one of the cots, which groaned and sagged. I shifted my weight to maintain a proper balance, and leaned over to see what Holmes had plucked from Amos Beiler’s intestinal gore. His tweezers deposited a strand of hair onto a round microscope slide. He pressed another slide atop it, then handed the sandwiched hair to me.

Having traveled with Holmes many times, I wasn’t surprised when he pulled various laboratory instruments from his overnight case. The first was

his pocket microscope in its dark red morocco drum case.

“A Penrose and Company device, and one that always comes in handy,” he said, twisting off the top of the drum case and removing the microscope. “What do you think of the hair? Could it belong to an animal?”

“You know I can’t say without further examination. Even with a microscope, it’s not a simple matter to identify animal hairs, as opposed to human.” I held the slide toward the gas lamp and its dribble of light. The hair in question was but an inch long, thick and coarse in appearance.

“Why, it looks more like fur than hair. I need more light to say for sure, Holmes, but the strand has barbs along it, doesn’t it?”

“I believe so, yes.” He took the slide back from me and deposited it in the bottom of the tri-pronged microscope, then secured the top of the instrument to the bottom. He peered through the tube. “Definitely not human. The barbs rule that out, as you say, Doctor. But there’s something else here, something very strange about this strand of hair… or fur. I need my other field microscope. Retrieve it, would you?”

I dug through his bag of instruments. Safely tucked at the bottom due to its size was Holmes’s Carpenter & Westley microscope, one of his prized possessions. While he packed up the smaller instrument and gazed at a dark stain on one of the bones, I assembled the more powerful instrument.

I glanced over, and we both smiled, sharing the moment. Not many people understand the intense thrill of working with sophisticated scientific instruments. It absolutely thrilled me, I will admit, that the lenses could be stacked for extra magnification. It absolutely thrilled me that the instrument handled aqueous study as well as live specimens, and slides such as the one we prepared for the strand plucked from Mr. Beiler’s intestines. Science is more beautiful and exciting than exotic women and paintings in rich hues.

I gestured toward the microscope.

“After you,” I said.

He slipped the sample in place and adjusted the screw pin to hold the slide securely.

“While I do this,” he said, “take a look at the stain.”

“But why? Surely, it’s from Mr. Beiler’s blood.”

“Humor me.”

I sat beside him on the floor and trained his magnifying lens on the bone with the stain that had captured his attention. Under the lens, the stain was not dark red, brown, or black. The bone appeared to be part of Beiler’s

pelvic girdle. Along with what looked like dried human blood was a splotch unlike any I'd ever seen on a body, alive or dead. Its shape was peculiar, oval with intertwined tendrils, much as a jellyfish. I couldn't quite identify the color or put a name to it, and then it hit me:

The color was the same odd hue I'd seen in the paintings owned by both Professor Fitzgerald and Amos Beiler. A jolt of horror wrenched me from the delight I'd felt at playing with Holmes's scientific equipment.

The stain on the bone caught the feeble light from Mrs. Hinds's gas lamp and sparked in cubes, heptagons, and odd shapes I didn't recognize.

"Not from a hare or a fox or a dog," Holmes muttered, twiddling with his lenses. "And then there's this imprint, Watson, on the strand itself, like nothing on any animal hair I've studied." We switched positions, so that I might examine the strange hair and Holmes the bizarre bloodstain.

When we exchanged glances this time, we didn't smile. There was a long pause.

"A species unknown to modern man?" I suggested.

"The singularity of a piece of evidence is a clue in itself, Watson. Consider, how did this novel hair find its way into Mr. Beiler's intestines? How did the odd stain imprint itself upon his bone?"

"The hair was left by the person who killed him. That person had a creature with him."

"A creature for what purpose?"

I shrugged. I hadn't a clue.

"Perhaps the killer wore a fur-trimmed garment," I offered.

"One strand imprinted with odd shapes and lodged in the intestines. No fur anywhere else. Not another strand on the floor, the remains, the door. Your conclusion is feasible, but unlikely."

I changed the topic.

"The stain was left by the killer, who stamped the bone to identify himself," I suggested. "Perhaps he stamps the bones of everyone he kills."

"Again, for what purpose?"

Again, I shrugged. "Only the killer can tell us that."

"I find, dear fellow, that when a crime is truly bizarre, as is this one, there invariably is a simple answer in the end. I do not believe that the killer had a beast with him, for there is no evidence of such a beast on the premises of any of the crime scenes. Not in the tram building—despite Willie Jacobs's

description of the machine as the beast. Not in the Beiler barn. Nothing in the reports from the other killings.

"Nor do I believe that the killer stamped the bones of his victims," he continued. "If he wanted to stamp the crimes as his own, surely it sufficed to leave behind the singular spherical bones etched with bizarre symbols. No, Watson, something else is at play. Something I've not yet encountered."

*

Pinching the ratty blanket around my neck, I tried to glean some warmth from it, and was unsuccessful. The wind had abated, leaving only the bark of a dog or yowl of a cat to interrupt the quiet. I lay fully clad and semi-awake, unable to sleep, while across from me on the other cot, Sherlock Holmes dozed peacefully, his hands folded across his stomach, his breathing even.

Soon the sun would rise, and Mrs. Hinds would cook tomatoes, sausage, and eggs. Even a weak tea would suffice to warm my bones. How much longer must I wait for the morning? How much longer…

I rolled onto my side and shut my eyes.

Floorboards creaked over my head, and Holmes stirred.

I expected footsteps with the creaks, but heard none. Instead, a great pattering rose as if the room above was overrun by squirrels or mice. The ceiling groaned. Crickets took up a steady thrum.

A flute fluttered on high notes, then sank to a low whine.

My eyes flew open.

A flute?

And then, a sweet high voice danced across the high notes, harmonizing with the mournful instrument.

Holmes sat upright on his cot.

"Italian," he said as he lit a candle, "Vincenzo Bellini. A soprano of highest class. Ah, the opera, Watson, *the opera*. I am reminded of Irene Adler, though she was a contralto and could not achieve these notes of highest purity."

I knew scant Italian but vaguely recognized the tune from the opera *Norma*. The words sounded *off*, however—not quite Italian at all.

"The words are wrong," Holmes said suddenly, a puzzled expression appearing on his face. "*Alone, disdaining grosser Earth's nocturnal veil—*

this is the translation—but this soprano, she's twisted the words into something else. But what?"

I could not say.

And then the voice rang out.

"*Ebb'yuh dissoth'nknpflknghreet!*"

Kristoffer Beiler's horrified face screamed in my mind:

"Should you hear the shrieking in the elder language, whatever you do, don't leave your room to investigate. You could die!"

"*Ebb'yuh dissoth'nknpflknghreet!*"

Holmes was already halfway to the door when I bolted next to him in three bounds and grabbed his elbow.

"Do not leave the room!" I cried.

"But surely, you don't believe…"

"On the contrary, I do believe, I *do*!"

He shook me off.

The soprano was no longer sweet. She fizzled down to mezzo, and another voice, a contralto—the lowest of female operatic voices—boomed in her place.

"*Dub'ghreet vzulvzghq'q'q'yuh q'q'q'vzulvzgh!*"

The phrases came fast and clipped. They rose quickly to a shriek.

"*Dub'ghreet. Vzulvzghq'q'q'yuh. Dub'ghreet vzulvzghq 'q'q'yuh q'q'q'vzulvzgh!*" The cricket's thrum syncopated the phrases and the shrieking as if an unearthly chorus. The pattering overhead beat like drums.

"*Dub'ghreet vzulvzghq'q'q'yuh q'q'q'vzulvzgh!*"

Clad in his white nightgown, Holmes shifted like a ghost toward the door, and when I loosed my grip upon his elbow, he grabbed the knob and yanked the door open.

"I urge you to reconsider. Do not leave the room," I implored. "You don't know what's up there. It barely sounds human!" As if on cue, the flute fluttered. The contralto moaned in the most eerie fashion, as if not a woman, not a ghost, not anything I could imagine.

Falling back upon my bed, which threatened to break beneath my weight, I clasped my hands over my ears. The din was too loud. It was strident. It was enough to make a man mad.

"A gathering of others, thinking themselves special, trying to scare us away," Holmes said.

My head felt as if it would explode.

As if my brain would melt.

“These are just people, no different from you or me, flesh and blood, that’s all, Watson.” This time, he had to scream above the noise so I could hear him.

And just like that, the cacophony died. All fell silent but for the bark of a distant dog.

“Just people, no different from you or me,” Holmes repeated. His shoulders sagged. Abruptly, he said, “I’m tired, Watson, and in no mood for it.”

He turned and shut the door, and slipped beneath his blanket.

“We *will* get to the bottom of this,” he asserted finally. “But for now, I will listen to your advice, Doctor, and we will get our sleep. We have much to do in the day ahead. I need *you* with your full wits.”

With that, he dozed off as if nothing strange had happened. Exhausted, I fell into a murky slumber, in which I heard Holmes’s voice, lecturing me during the case that he termed his “study in scarlet.”

> *“Do you remember what Darwin said in* The Descent of Man *about music?”* Holmes had asked.
>
> I’d thought I knew, but then Holmes had surprised me.
>
> *“There are vague memories in our souls of those misty centuries when the world was in its childhood,”* he’d said, and *“we must suppose that the rhythms and cadences of oratory are derived from previously developed musical powers.”*

In my sleep, I was certain my friend had quoted Darwin in this manner during his “study in scarlet,” but in retrospect and in checking my notes, I don’t think he quoted Darwin at such length. As I dreamed, however, I knew why these ideas took hold in me. Darwin believed that the earliest roots of language came from musical utterance. Perhaps tonight at the Loggerheads, the weird music had seeped into my soul and triggered those vague memories of misty centuries when the world was new.

Perhaps that’s what this music was—the earliest vocalization of thoughts by…

Who?

Or what?

17

Dawn brought welcome relief. In the wash of morning, it was hard to believe that I'd heard keening and shrieking, contralto and soprano, a mournful flute, crickets as a chorus, and the drumming of rodent paws. But Holmes had heard the same sounds, the same music and utterances.

"Put it from your mind," he said. "These are people who have shunned a family of furniture builders for centuries, based solely on superstition and gossip. They were trying to frighten us off."

And they very nearly succeeded, I added silently.

His words didn't soothe me. If anything, my unease was growing. The furniture at the Beiler farm had jangled my nerves, which had already been sensitive since the tram deaths. I didn't feel like myself. Rather, I felt *off*, as if the air around me was disturbed, ruptured in spots, perhaps warped. I couldn't identify my malady. The unease was illogical, but I felt it nonetheless.

Our carriage bumped along the dirt road leading to Lord Wiltshram's estate. It was time to examine Amos Beiler's cherry divan.

Holmes sat with his hands resting on his lap, his eyes clear and focused. He didn't seem disturbed. Whatever afflicted me bothered my friend not at all.

I noticed, however, that he was wearing Beiler's special gloves.

Groggy from a night of ill slumber, I dozed. When I awakened, Holmes's face lit up with delight.

"I've been puzzling through the code that grants entrance to the tram building and studying Amos Beiler's furniture diagrams alongside the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*," he said. "Now I'm anxious to see Beiler's cherry divan, made fifteen years ago, directly before the death of Beiler's wife, Amelia. While the divan isn't one of the three items of furniture described on this ancient hide—" he pointed to the book "—I believe that Mr. Beiler constructed it using the same principles."

Still half-asleep, I rubbed my eyes and gazed blearily at the giant stones spaced equidistantly along the side of the road, circling the perimeter of the large field beyond. *These are the famous Avebury stones*, I thought, *set here for the ages by our ancestors*.

“Do you realize that most of what we’ve seen has been connected to the number *three*?” I asked Holmes.

“I do,” he replied. “Three corpses were found in the alley near Willie Jacobs’s tram machine building. Jacobs found three spherical bones near his father’s remains. But stranger, three loggerheads were at the top of each strap of Kristoffer Beiler’s braces, and the Beilers’s ancient hide described the three items of furniture. Yet I see no connection,” he concluded. “The loggerheads, for example, might pertain to Christianity.”

“True,” I said, “and yet… Holmes, have you noticed the mistletoe growing on the trees in these parts?”

“Of course. It’s peculiar to see such an abundance, and I also saw mistletoe on a tray in Fitzgerald’s London home.”

“What do you make of the strange geometries?” I asked. “And how are *they* connected to one another?”

“I don’t yet know,” he replied. “I’m puzzling through one step at a time, inching closer to the truth, I hope. Our killer is not a common thug. The geometries of the machine, the barn, the furniture—

“The hair.”

“Yes, *and* the hair—” He stopped. “Yes, the *hair*. I cannot account for that. Tell me, Watson, have you read *Flatland* by Edwin Abbott?”

“*Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*?”

His eyes twinkled.

“*Flatland* suggests life in dimensions other than our own. It is *not* a romance novel, Watson, such as your Mary might read.”

“Why, I’ll have you know, Holmes, that Mary has read *Flatland*. It’s one of the most fascinating books in the past ten years. Mary shared her copy with me when I was courting her.”

“She has an interest in mathematics, your Mary?”

Ah, she did indeed. Mary was far more than a pretty face and a kind heart. Her intellect would rival Irene Adler’s, I’d say, though perhaps Holmes would rank her a notch beneath. I was biased, of course.

“She did more than embroidery while growing up, Holmes,” I replied. “Her mother dead, her father in the Indian regiment, you might recall that she spent her childhood in a boarding establishment and that books and learning were her comfort.” I didn’t know how much to tell him. Most people were uncomfortable around women of great intellect.

Mary downplayed her own knowledge and skills when in the company of other women. She only discussed babies and household matters with them, but privately, with me, she was quite different. A woman whose conversation was far more stimulating than most men's. She'd learned from miserable experience that displaying her knowledge would drive other women away and incite gossip.

Holmes, on the other hand, might enjoy my wife's conversation—if he ever got beyond dragging me away from her and being reprimanded about my safety.

He surprised me and suggested that we show the furniture diagrams and the *Dagonite Auctoritatem* to Mary. I objected, citing the potential danger—for example, I pointed out the need to wear special gloves—but said that I was willing to jot down and show Mary some of the odd symbols that Holmes had found. I was willing to describe the bizarre geometries to her.

He flipped the book open and pointed to a page filled with jumbled geometric constructions and symbols. At first glance, it appeared to be an arcane jumble within which I thought I saw the sun and possibly our own planet.

"The distance from the sun to the Earth?" I suggested.

"Look more carefully," he prodded. "What do you see?"

My gaze swept the page, which was filled with intricate and elaborate detail. Abruptly, the carriage lurched. I blinked and looked up.

We had passed the gigantic stones of Avebury proper, and the carriage had bounced down a country lane to an even narrower side lane. Here, the hedges obscured the fields, and the trees scraped the top of the compartment. The driver cursed up front, and the horses grunted. The driver seemed anxious to dump us at the Wiltshram estate and hurry back to town.

"We're almost at our destination, Watson," Holmes said impatiently. "Look at the page!" He seemed unusually excited, so I returned my attention to the book. Nevertheless, I understood none of it. Lines, triangles, circles, complicated geometries that seemed infinite in their depths, curved lines wrapped around symbols, endless swirls like springs cast into infinity. Jumbles of symbols. All of it on yellowed animal hide and inked in what appeared to be dried blood.

"Watson, you were in the war," he pressed. "Have you ever seen a cipher of this type?"

"Cipher? What cipher?"

“This cipher!”

He pointed. Toward the bottom of the page, numbers huddled on coils. Excitement trilled through me. At last, something we could understand!

I gasped.

“Yes!” Holmes cried. “You see it, too, don’t you, dear Watson? I’ve been puzzling over them.”

I barely got the words out.

“These are the numbers… this is the strange code that grants entrance to Willie Jacobs’s tram machine building.”

The carriage jerked to a halt. Up front, the horses snorted and their hooves pawed at rock. The driver’s boots hit rock, and our door swung open.

“We are here, sirs,” he announced. “I won’t be waiting for you.” The man sounded entirely unapologetic.

Holmes and I ducked from the carriage, hauling our belongings. As Holmes paid the driver, I stretched my legs and rolled my shoulders. It felt good to be out of the carriage.

The lane was hard dirt and gray rock. Looming before us across a wide expanse of lawn was the Wiltshram estate. Carefully clipped shrubs edged the rounded lawn. Fountains gurgled. Statues stared. Dormant flower beds slept at their feet. Lord Wiltshram was not a poor man.

Lugging his travel cases, my companion cut an imposing figure as he strode up the lawn toward the manor. Nothing intimidated Mr. Sherlock Holmes. He’d handled cases of major international importance, solved the problems of kings. I don’t think he was afraid of anything, except failure.

As usual, I hurried after him.

“The code, 300000 437 500 197 207 82 79 18 16,” he said. “What is 300000?”

“Why, I don’t know, Holmes.”

“Watson, it is very close to Foucault’s 1862 measurement of the speed of light: 299,796 kilometers per second.”

He was right, of course, and I should have remembered this fact.

But…

“How do you know about the speed of light, Holmes? You’ve never expressed an interest in astronomy.”

“I leave no stone unturned, Watson, when working on a case, you know that.” He tapped his walking stick against the first step of a massive

staircase that led to the manor door. On either side of us, statues stood guard. “I consulted with an astronomy professor in London. He verified much of what I read, and a colleague of his verified the rest.”

I tried to redeem myself. “Ole Rømer, the Danish astronomer, calculated the speed of light in 1676,” I said.

“Yes, using nothing more than a telescope and a clock. I would have enjoyed meeting Mr. Rømer. I’m certain he possessed an extraordinary mind.” Holmes stopped before a wooden door that was several times his height and studded with dozens of metal bolts, each the size of his head. The brass knocker was odd—an octopus with wings and fish scales.

“Then again,” he added, “another astronomy professor informed me that light from the full moon is 300,000 times weaker than sunlight. So our 300000 may instead refer to that number—assuming, of course, that you believe astronomers. It’s a very imprecise science, Watson. And the other numbers… 437 500?”

Mentally, I reviewed the various astronomy-related documents I’d read. Nothing came to mind that corresponded to 437 500. Finally, I told Holmes that I didn’t have a clue as to the meaning of these next two numbers.

He shook his head and admitted that he didn’t know what they meant, either. “But I will tell you the rest of what I’ve deduced, dear fellow, about the door code. You see, 197 is the atomic weight of gold.”

The gold found in the tram machine building…

“While 207 is the atomic weight of lead,” I observed.

“And 16 is the atomic weight of oxygen,” he said.

“Why, Holmes, you are a genius!” I enthused. He shook his head.

“Watson, I simply talked to the experts, that’s all, and one of my greatest joys *is* chemistry. Hence, I deduced part of the code on my own. I still don’t know the meanings behind 82, 79, and 18. The most interesting question here is why the bizarre door code exists in Amos Beiler’s *Dagonite Auctoritatem*.”

Holmes stared intently at the octopus knocker.

“Curious,” he said.

After several raps, the door swung inward, and the smell of old furnishings wafted out. A butler as stiff as any dignitary I’d seen in the British government led us to a sitting room. He disappeared through a side door to get his master, while Holmes and I settled onto matching sofas lavished in gold and rose upholstery.

I sank against the gold-tasseled pillows, thinking about my wife, missing her. Was it possible for a man to be satisfied with what he had? I wondered.

It seemed as if there were two types of men—those who craved adventure, excitement, challenges, intellectual pursuit, or some combination thereof, and those who were satisfied with their lot and wanted nothing more than a steady life with no distractions. I wanted adventure, excitement, challenges, and intellectual pursuits, which I identified with Sherlock Holmes, but I also wanted a steady life with Mary. Perhaps I was a misfit.

With a start, I wondered what Mary wanted from life: was *I* enough for *her*? Did I leave her alone too much?

"You're thinking about Mary," Holmes said, as if reading my mind. "Your eyes are far away and sad, my friend. I'm sorry to take you away from your family."

"It won't be for long, and Mary does understand."

"Still, I should realize that you're no longer a bachelor, living in my rooms and available at all hours to help with my inquiries. You have a much more important companion now. Your wife, and you also have a son. I fear that I've been too demanding of your time."

Strangely, Holmes's words bothered me. He was as fine a man as I could ever hope to know. Had I never met him, my life would have been dreary, empty, and lost. He had invigorated me back in the days when I was at my lowest point, still injured after the war, nursing my wounds, feeling luckless and without hope of any happiness.

He had wrenched me from what might have become a life of self-pity, self-indulgence, and ultimately, self-loathing though I hope that—had fortune not brought us together—I might have healed sufficiently and recovered my vigor on my own, pulling myself back on my feet. My post-war period of lethargy had been most unlike my previous self. Yet it was Holmes who had been the true instrument of my recovery.

I was about to say as much when a large man bustled into the room, followed by a small entourage of five or six persons, both men and women. Holmes and I rose to our feet and each shook the man's hand, and he bowed slightly and gestured at us to follow him to a far end of the room.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Let us sit together."

His voice wasn't as aristocratic as I'd expected. His accent was of the upper crust, those schooled at the finest establishments England had to

offer, but there was a roughness—an edge—to his words.

“I know of you, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, of course,” he said. “I am honored by your presence in my humble abode, but I don’t understand what brings you all the way from London to the countryside of Avebury. Are you on holiday?”

“I am helping Scotland Yard, Lord Wiltshram,” my friend replied. “This is a murder investigation.” He watched carefully for a reaction.

“Murder?” The man turned abruptly. “Here? Surely, you’re not serious. There’s been no foul play in these parts, I can assure you.”

Wiltshram clasped his hands behind his back. His head trembled slightly and rhythmically, exhibiting a constant tremor. He stared over Holmes’s shoulder and never made eye contact with either of us, such that I suspected he suffered from a nervous disorder. I’d seen such tremors in victims of poisoning, liver failure, even alcohol abuse. I’d also seen the same symptoms in disorders for which medical science could find no known cause.

His lips were fat, his face puffy. His starched white shirt and green silk cummerbund did nothing to conceal his bloated stomach, which gave him the overall shape of an egg. For the most part he was clean-shaven, and yet coarse hairs straggled from his chin and neck. They were thick and wiry, like the strand we’d found stuck to Amos Beiler’s intestinal mush, though I doubted that they were barbed.

He wore a jacket of gold and rose embroidery, an ornamental title sash of green silk with a giant gold clasp by the cummerbund. The clasp was shaped like an octopus with wings and fish scales.

How peculiar.

“Your family crest?” I asked.

Wiltshram flinched… or perhaps it was his medical condition, the tremors.

At that moment Holmes left us to examine the cherry divan that was in a clear area of the room. A polygonal rug embroidered with rose and green symbols led to the divan.

“The Crest of Dagon,” Lord Wiltshram stated dramatically, as if announcing the Queen of England. “It has been in my family for centuries.” One shaking fat hand waved toward a painting over the divan.

The Crest of Dagon painting was even more bizarre than the paintings in Professor Fitzgerald’s London home. Barbed green strands twisted up both

sides of a yellow nonagon and curled into a knot on top. Within the nonagon, three green octopuses, each with wings and fish scales, glared down at us. Tentacles embraced the family name at the bottom of the crest.

But the family name was not Wiltshram. It was Dagon.

Holmes kneeled on the rug and peered at the three ornate posts that supported the cherry divan.

"*Dagon*, the ancient Semitic god, symbolized by grain for fertility and by fish for multiplying," he said, running his hand over the wood. "Dagon was worshiped as far back as 2500 BC, possibly earlier."

One of Lord Wiltshram's attendants, a short, scrawny man with a shaggy beard, tugged at Holmes's coat. His words were sharp.

"Sir, that is enough. The divan is unique, and worth much."

Holmes hoisted himself up. He towered over the little man, whose even stare told me that he wasn't afraid. As puffy and twitching as Lord Wiltshram was, this man was skeletal and calm.

Opposite extremes, I thought.

"And you are…?" Holmes said, pulling a brier pipe from an inner coat pocket.

"Me name is unimportant. I am o' the Order o' Dagon and but a servant to Lord Dagon."

"Did you mean to say a servant of Lord Wiltshram?" Holmes pressed tobacco into his pipe, tamped it down, and struck a match on his shoe. He puffed until the pipe began smoking, then returned his attention to the short fellow whose name was unimportant.

"He meant that he is *my* servant, yes," Lord Wiltshram said quickly, "and now, all of you, I ask you to leave." He glanced at the members of the entourage. To the short man, he added, "I'll deal with you later, Smythe-Barton."

Wiltshram's threat broke the man's calm.

"But master, I meant no 'arm. I spoke too quickly."

"I said *go!*"

Smythe-Barton scurried out with his companions, leaving Lord Wiltshram—the master—alone with Holmes and me.

"You will ignore the ravings of my staff. The Smythe-Bartons have been with my family for centuries—I can't seem to get rid of them." Wiltshram chuckled drily. "I'm sure you understand."

Holmes didn't respond to Wiltshram's obsequious comment.

“Can you explain how this divan remains upright, given its architecture?” he asked instead. “The three short posts holding it up, the table surface that slants oddly toward the floor yet holds a tray of… if I’m not mistaken, mistletoe… the side panels that are cut in such odd shapes.”

Again, the fat man chuckled. He fell into an overstuffed chair that wheezed under his bulk. His face flushed brightly then returned to its normal rosy tint. Milky blue eyes goggled at us, bulging from beneath puffy lids.

I frowned slightly. Puffy eyelids were of no medical consequence. Overall body swelling was another matter, possibly a symptom of edema due to injury or inflammation. Small blood vessels had broken on his face, indicating the release of fluid into his tissues.

“I can’t explain the nature of the divan, Mr. Holmes. I commissioned it from a Mr. Amos Beiler. He was… *is* a well-known craftsman of extremely fine furniture. That was some fifteen years ago, mind you. The mistletoe is common in these parts. Old Druid ways. They mean nothing to us now.”

“These paintings of the weird creatures, these symbols on your rug,” I asked, “what do they mean, Lord Wiltshram?”

Another false laugh, and Wiltshram ignored me.

“What are you after, Mr. Holmes? You mention murder, yet I know of no such events anywhere near here, and now you and your companion ask about my family crest and my private furnishings. Frankly, sir, I find your questions intrusive.”

“My apologies,” Holmes said. “We mean no offense, sir. We have other business in Avebury.”

“Very well, then, perhaps it is time for you to take your leave.” Wiltshram placed shaking hands on his armrests and heaved himself up, then rang for the butler, who quickly slipped into the room from the side door.

“Pontose, see these men out, would you?”

The butler bowed. Holmes and I bowed slightly to Lord Wiltshram, then followed his man to the front hall.

As he opened the heavy door, the stiff man suddenly became animated. Large black eyes stared keenly at Holmes, brows furrowed. Pontose grabbed Holmes, leading me to wrench the man’s arm off my friend and stand between them.

“Your meaning, sir?” I asked sternly.

Holmes didn’t flinch.

The butler’s eyes softened, and I relaxed, seeing that he meant no harm.

“Be careful, gentlemen,” he said. “There are gatherings in these parts, and strangers aren’t welcome.”

Holmes stepped out onto the stone porch, where the statues waited. The air hung like a heavy drape. The clouds threatened another storm. The fountains no longer gurgled, for the servants had turned them off.

“I’m not afraid of gatherings, sir,” Holmes said. “I fear little. I seek to understand. Why did your master dismiss us so abruptly?”

The butler didn’t respond.

“Very well,” Holmes said. “We’re off to see the Beiler table at Lord and Lady Ashberton’s estate. Tell me, are they also of the Dagon family?”

At this, the butler turned white and he shrank back.

“The Dagon *family* refers to the Order of Dagon,” Holmes pressed, “and they are one and the same, am I right?”

“You’d best go, sir,” the butler cried, trembling. “You’d best go now!”

Then Pontose slammed the door, leaving us to the storm.

18

“All of my children *died*.”

Lady Ashberton gazed at a black drawing framed on the wall over Amos Beiler’s table. White images had been etched into the black in the shape of a swimming jellyfish, its head to the left with hundreds of snarled tentacles flowing toward the right. A complementary piece hung beside it with the head of the jellyfish-like object in its center, tentacles tangled in all directions.

Next to the table, a skull gaped from its niche in waist-high stone.

“All dead,” she pronounced. “All dead because I live on the Line.”

She turned to face me, and it was quite an effort. First, she shuffled her left foot outward until it angled as far as she could move it, then she shuffled the right foot to match the angle. She completed this maneuver three times, tottered, and grasped the table of odd dimensions.

I dove for her, expecting a violent fall, but the table did not totter with her. Much to my surprise, it held steady.

Only two legs propped up the table, one beneath the center rear and one beneath the center front. The table top spanned twice the length of my body along the wall and jutted but one foot wide. How it remained standing was a mystery. Deep cherry stained the oak, making the elaborate swirls stand out sharply. The sheen off the table top was dazzling even in dim light.

“But the table—the wood itself—why, it matches your drawings, Lady Ashberton.” I stared at the swirled jellyfish-like table surface, then at the black images.

Holmes stood with his hands steepled beneath his chin. Rain dripped from his hair and soaked his suit. He shivered slightly from the cold, and I feared that he would drive himself to pneumonia if he thought it would solve the murders of Jacobs, Beiler, and those who had died in the tram disaster. Like Holmes, I was also chilled to the bone, my clothes sopping, my body shaking.

I hoped we could deal quickly with the Ashbertons and return to the cramped but dry confines of the inn, where we could don warm clothes and enjoy Mrs. Hinds’s hot tea.

“All dead,” Lady Ashberton repeated. “The energy lines, those that the Order of Dagon knows exist beneath the earth, killed my babies. Ten babies

in all. Ten years in a row. My husband almost left me, but instead buried himself in the efforts of Dagon."

"Surely, you don't believe that energy lines exist beneath the earth, madam, and that they killed your offspring!" Holmes exclaimed. Then as an afterthought, he calmed himself and added, "My most sincere condolences, madam, for your terrible losses. Undeniably tragic."

He walked across the thick but ancient carpet. Its hues were rose and gold, in the same tones as the furnishings at the Wiltshram estate. To my chagrin, he left a trail of mud and leaves. We'd done our best to scrape our shoes and shake off the rain when the Ashberton butler let us into the mansion, but both of us remained wet and ragged from our long walk through the countryside.

"Yes," she mumbled, seeming not to notice. Grappling for a chair, she fell into it. "It *is* tragic, isn't it? Ten babies, all stillborn. According to my husband, it is the way of the Others, and so to him, it matters not."

"Madam, what do you mean by 'the way of the others?'" I asked. "What others?"

Large round eyes goggled up at me. Black irises stared from green-tinged orbs. I'd never seen human eyes as bizarre as Lady Ashberton's. Her face also bore a greenish cast, as did her thin lips. She was gaunt, with hollowed cheeks and wispy gray hair that straggled to her shoulders. Her dress hung loosely, and I noticed that it was the type worn by ladies long before my time. Perhaps my grandmother wore such a dress. I wouldn't know. My grandparents had all perished before I knew them.

"I wore this on my honeymoon," she murmured as she plucked at the worn frills on her sleeves. "We went to the sea."

"These others," I prodded, "are they family members? In-laws perhaps?"

"The Others…" she said slowly, her voice drifting. Then as if reciting a mantra, she intoned in measured paces. "The Others will come forth from Silbury Hill and from West Kennet Long Barrow. The Others will rise from the sea. They dwell beneath the earth along the two lines that bisect this island and intersect in Avebury." The round eyes stared at nothing. "The fertility lines that flow along the earth's currents cross beneath this house. Surely you know of the Lines, Dr. Watson?"

A narrow tongue flicked across her upper lip, then retreated into her mouth.

I'd seen my share of women who'd given birth many years in a row, but none was as badly affected as this poor creature. A malignancy had taken root and spread. A disease. I was reminded of Willie Jacobs, who also suffered defects I couldn't pinpoint.

Lady Ashberton wasn't long for this world. How could a woman in her condition survive?

Holmes strode to the framed drawings and the table, stared at them, locking them into his mind, and then he stooped by the lady and held her withered hand.

"My dear lady," he said gently, "I don't know about these others you mention. The ancient Druids might have associated the Avebury stones with sunrise and sunset, which given their nature, cast lines and shadows… but fertility or energy lines that kill?"

He broke off. Our island's heritage included the pagan ways of the Druids, but for Sherlock Holmes—and indeed for myself—these were ways of the past, before modern science was known. Human sacrifice. Blood rites. Mumbo jumbo. Poppycock.

"Madam," I said, taking her other hand, "would you like me to send a colleague out to see you? I know of a good man who lives near here. Your pulse feels weak. You need more nourishment."

"What do *you* know of my family and our ways?" The voice startled me. "Step away from my wife, gentlemen. Your behavior is entirely unacceptable."

Holmes dropped the lady's hand, which fell to her lap and curled, the fingers disappearing beneath the palm as a turtle's legs disappear into its shell. I did the same, as Holmes stood and inclined his head.

"Lord Ashberton, I presume? My humble apologies for touching your wife's hand. I was merely trying to comfort her. She'd just told us the wretched story about your stillborn—"

"—about your children," I jumped in. "Our sympathies, sir."

As I spoke, I tried to maintain eye contact with Ashberton, but it was impossible to ignore his attire. He carried a staff made of oak, spiraled on top and with leaflike ornaments that curled higher than his head. A gold triangular hat emblazoned with the Crest of Dagon sat on a wide head with sagging features. The eyes drooped, bags beneath them. The cheeks hung in folds. The matted gray beard and shaggy hair did little to conceal the additional folds on his lower face, chin, and neck.

His portly body was clad in a white dressing gown and a velvet cloak with tassel ties. Ruffled cuffs and slippers were monogrammed with octopuses. Then I noticed the unusual embroidery edging his cloak—multi-limbed figures with heads split into geometric patterns, mathematical symbols, and streams of numbers.

The numbers were all multiples of three.

“This is none of your business,” he boomed. “My wife has suffered long and hard trying to give me children, and it’s best to leave our ordeals in the past. Nor do they concern you, sirs.”

“As you wish. We mean no harm,” Holmes said. “We have come about the Beiler table. You may be unaware, sir, that Amos Beiler died only days ago. We are investigating his death, which is clearly of a suspicious nature.”

“There is nothing suspicious in this world,” Ashberton said. “We may not understand it yet, that’s all.”

“I agree,” Holmes said. “Science is supreme, and what we don’t know now, we will discover later.”

“Yes.” Lord Ashberton examined Holmes as if studying a specimen beneath a microscope. He settled into a chair by the table. “It’s an extraordinary table. Nobody could construct such a remarkable piece but Amos Beiler, and possibly his son, Kristoffer. They are devotees of the sublime, Mr. Holmes. Amos was well aware of the boundaries of space and time, as am I. He knew how to exploit the place where spirits mingle with the living. He knew about the Lines, you see, where we worship, and some might say, control the supernatural energies flowing from the place of the Others.”

“Tell me, sir,” Holmes said, “do you believe in witches?”

“We have nothing to do with the idiocy of witchcraft,” Ashberton spat. “We are purists, Mr. Holmes. Our beliefs are based on fact. Without people like me, England would not possess its monuments dedicated to nature. England would not have its Avebury.”

Holmes laughed under his breath, but quickly grew silent, though his eyes still twinkled with amusement. Certainly he did not entertain notions beyond what is clearly of this world, explained by science and logic. The supernatural, all of this talk of Druids and energy lines—I knew it had to be taxing his patience. He controlled himself admirably, but Holmes had his limits.

He couldn’t long conceal how he felt about such beliefs.

“There are no supernatural energies, sir. There is no way to build furnishings infused with the supernatural. All of this talk is utter nonsense.” When Ashberton glared at him, he changed the subject, perhaps to avoid a heated argument, but also to get to the point of our visit. “Would you tell me how this table stands upon these two legs? And what is the meaning of the spiral patterns?”

Lord Ashberton dipped his staff and pointed the swirled tip at Holmes. His lips parted. His eyelids fluttered, then shut. He mumbled a stream of gibberish, and opened his eyes to give Holmes a full-blast glare.

“*Eeesh-beanjzh-ig-gooolmoreunjghtzaicklefrosh g’vlag!*” he boomed. Holmes didn’t react, and I give him credit for that. This time he didn’t laugh.

As for me, I wondered if the people of Avebury had all gone mad. I knew that pockets of Druidic worship remained in the deep countryside, usually located near springs and in oak forests. Despite our modern advances there remained those who worshiped the supernatural, but never had I seen such a display of lunacy. Lord Ashberton had to be out of his mind.

What a dreadful life Lady Ashberton must have led. He appeared to be sixty, she appeared to be a hundred. I could only imagine how her insane husband had reacted when she’d lost ten of his babies.

Abruptly, Lord Ashberton rose, grabbed an iron device from the wall, and blew into its spiraled end. The blast of a trumpet resounded and echoed off the high ceiling and walls. Holmes pressed his hands to his ears, and I did the same.

The door burst open. A man raced into the room. A beefy man, heavily muscled, with mean eyes. Ashberton dropped his iron instrument and clapped his hands, his face radiating delight. Before we could regain our senses, the beefy man dove at Holmes and grabbed his neck in two meaty fists.

The man’s weight knocked him over. Unable to breathe, Holmes’s knees folded. His face went white.

I jumped on the attacker’s back and tried to claw him off, but an elbow smashed into my ribs. Still gripped in a huge hand, Holmes gagged and flailed. His legs kicked. I grabbed the iron trumpet. With both hands, I lifted it over the man’s head.

The gaping skull smiled in its stone niche, and for a moment, I stared at the jagged teeth. Then with a resounding *crack*, I crashed the iron down,

and the man’s skull bled red. A long gash split open, and bone glistened beneath flesh.

19
LORD WILTSHRAM

Avebury

“Be a good man. Get me a hot toddy and some of Mrs. Seal’s biscuits. I’m in need of nourishment.” I flicked my hand at Pontose, who bowed, murmured something subservient, and withdrew.

While not a servant of Dagon, Pontose had been with me since my last butler died, some fifteen years ago this January. While we never overtly discussed my activities, I had the impression that Pontose didn’t entirely approve of my work on behalf of Lord Dagon. He lacked the breeding to understand.

From the cupboard beneath one of my special paintings, I lifted the bronze diadem which seemed to weigh more with each passing year. My father’s headdress, given to him by the devotees who dwelled by Half Moon Bay. Bronze mistletoe leaves adorned the three-lobed ridge along the top. The inner surface depicted symbols of water—waves, springs, eddies.

Standing beneath my family crest, I pushed the diadem over what was left of my hair. Instantly, heat coursed down my limbs and rushed into my head. It was the flush of those who *know*, and it was the precursor to the sweat that might boil me alive if I wasn’t a true believer.

I had no such worries. I *believed*.

Unhooking my jacket, I dropped it to the polygonal rug in front of the Beiler divan. Amos’s construction of this divan had cost Amelia Beiler her life. It hinged just so, balanced precisely on its two legs, and in the gleam of its surface I saw myself a thousandfold—rippling downward into the wood, Dagon within Dagon within Dagon.

Ah, the ecstasy. No matter that my own wife had left me in the dawn of our marriage. I’d never longed for the companionship of a woman, for the softness of flesh, or the absurd emotions that came with human interactions. I needed nothing but *this*…

Kneeling on the rug in front of the divan, I stared at the etched symbols I’d seen so many times. I’d memorized their patterns and yet hadn’t a clue what they meant or why Lord Dagon required me to attempt to choke them out with my inadequate vocal cords. I would never get them right. *Never*.

“This is but a fragment of what is to come. If you want more power, chant these words, and more words will come.” So my father taught me, saying it like a mantra in my earliest years.

I cleared my mind—*must cleanse myself for Lord Dagon*—and elevated myself into a trancelike state. My body quivered. My hands always trembled these days, but now they *shook*. I gurgled the words over and over, knowing in the depths of my soul that should I ever utter them correctly, Dagon would triumph. He would set us free of the flesh. He would reclaim us as in the days of old.

This was the gospel according to my father, the former Lord Wiltshram. I'd killed him with my own hands, here in this very room. I'd been sixteen at the time. I inherited it all, and took the most beautiful girl of Avebury as my bride, only to drive her away a year later due to my lust for Dagon. I suppose that the only bride for me was a *true* bride, a female of the Order.

But where will I find her?

My mind was not clear enough.

This would not do.

Focus.

My mouth struggled to form words from the symbols. "Ooooocheck hoof-v-triangle ooouh pitchfork laaaahwww check-Ooooo."

No, no, no. The symbols are so much more…

I beat my fists on the rug.

"Come to me, Lord Dagon!" I bellowed. "Release me from this prison! Have I not worshiped you long and hard enough? Have I not given up human conquests, and renounced the ways of ordinary men? Have I not sacrificed all that you've requested?"

Yet this was not the way. My sacrifices had to be for their own sake. I could not seek favor.

I collapsed back upon the rug, then began again.

Burn it behind my eyes.

Burn it into my soul.

Burn it.

I tried to sweep aside my thoughts, but they overpowered the need to etch the symbols into my mind, to push them so hard into my being that all else faded. Instead, my mind churned with the beliefs that I'd pounded into my subjects.

The affairs of men are petty, and as a man might see an ant or an earthworm, so the Greats of the Beyond see man.

Men don't matter, and certainly, their women matter less—for only females from the void are worthy mates.

Humans.

So inane. Here today, gone tomorrow, and nobody in the future will care. Even the greatest intellects and the greatest statesmen will be forgotten.

We are nothing but dust.

Did Edwin Abbott know of Dagon when he wrote *Flatland*? *Two-dimensional creatures, who dream of visiting one-dimensional worlds and seeing three-dimensional worlds*. Brilliant! Perhaps Abbott was a servant of Dagon. Perhaps his voice could enunciate the potent words that I struggled to mutter.

I exist for you, Lord Dagon.

I exist so you may come forth from wherever you dwell, all-powerful in the all-dimensional void.

The diadem weighed heavily on my head. It imprinted my flesh with waves, springs, and eddies.

"Fertility!" I shouted, throwing my arms up wide. The ceiling divided me from the open space of the void. The ceiling must go. "Blood sacrifice!" I screamed. The diadem bit my skin, and the blood streamed. I tasted it. I tasted the blood, and I wanted more.

I must find the sea. I must throw virgins into the sea. I must breed with the sea.

I must I must I must—

"Your hot toddy, sir."

A saucer clinked onto a table. A tray clinked beside it. I could hear Pontose breathing.

I blinked through trickles of blood and turned my head.

"Never interrupt, Pontose," I growled. Nevertheless, his features remained devoid of expression. The man had amazing self-control. I, on the other hand, had *no* self-control. I could barely contain myself near a tray of biscuits.

"Sir," he said simply, backing away a few steps.

"Begone. Go into town and have an ale with the rest of them. Leave me to myself. I have work to do. Important work."

Did an eyebrow lift ever so slightly?

"Ale, sir?"

"Yes, ale. Isn't that what you people drink?"

"I do enjoy the occasional drink, sir."

I scowled. He should know better than to test my patience. On the other hand, if I deceived him well, Pontose could be useful.

“Take yourself to the ale house, Pontose. I need you to perform an important task.” The butler drew himself up. A flicker of self-importance played in his eyes. “See what the villagers are saying about Sherlock Holmes and his visit here,” I said.

“The general view, sir, is that he’s here to see the Beiler furniture.”

“No, Pontose. I mean, what’s he *really* doing in Avebury? How does he know about me, and what does he know about my mission? What’s all this poppycock about *murder*?”

“The land steward heard that Holmes visited Professor Fitzgerald in London.”

Not good news.

Pontose continued. “The second footman has gathered that Holmes knows nothing of your, *um*, particular mission in life. The scullery maid heard that he came here for the clean, country air. The stable master and the grooms hope he can determine why your horses have fallen ill in recent years. They suspect foul play. The parlor maids can do nothing but rave about how, *um*, dashing Holmes is, though rumor has it that his interest in women is—”

“—like *my* interest in women, Pontose?”

A long pause.

“Not exactly, sir,” then quickly added, “but close enough.”

“Just go, would you? Find out what you can, and I don’t want household gossip this time.”

“Will you be wanting another hot toddy before I go?”

Blood dribbled down my nose. It was hot on my lips. A tang. A sweetness. I licked it off, then glared at him.

“I have what I need,” I muttered. “Please go. *Now*.” He nodded, bowed, and left me alone. The door snicked shut behind him. A clock chimed and echoed.

Crawling to the table, I lifted the glass and drank, and the liquid burned down my throat. Still on the rug, I fingered the bottom of the table for the buttons, and pressed the sequence as passed down from my father—*300000 437 500 197 207 82 79 18 16*. The bottom drawer slid open.

Chunks of gold glittered there. I scooped them up, marveled at the sheen as it caught the light, weighed the gold in my hand. It was worth a fortune.

Just this one handful, and I had plenty more.

"I thought you don't care none about earthly matters, you ol' 'ypocrite!"

I whirled. It was Runty Pete, the last of twelve brothers born into my service courtesy of the late Mrs. Smythe-Barton and God-only-knew-who as his father. The gold clunked back into place, and I slammed the door shut. The buttons popped, gears whined, and the door was nearly locked when a hand—*a small hand with hairy fingers*— yanked the drawer back open. I fell onto my side, caught myself, and rolled to a sitting position.

"Why, you annoying weasel!" I cried.

"You once called me an annoyin' flea, Wiltshram. Which am I? I can't be both a weasel and a flea." Runty Pete reached into the drawer and came back with a fistful of gold. "With all that you got, what if I take me a wee bit?" Hair from his tangled beard matted in one corner of a near-toothless grin. Pete loomed over me, but he was much shorter than I and weighed a third less. I heaved myself to my feet to tower over him.

"How *dare* you enter this room without my permission. How dare you speak to me in that tone of voice. How dare you take what isn't yours. Impertinent scum!"

"I dare because you sent the staff to town, even Pontose. 'ow often are you alone? Not often, methinks. I waited for the right moment. I ain't as dumb as you think." He shoved the gold into a pocket. When his hand came back out, it clenched a bloodstained dagger.

Long blade, rusty edge, wooden handle.

I could snap his wrist in a second.

He lunged for me, and he was quick. I staggered back, barely escaping the weapon. Determined that he would not have my gold.

Dagon's gold.

He would not have it.

I wrenched off my headdress and flung it on the table beside the biscuit tray and empty glass.

His mouth widened into a nasty grin, exposing a crooked set of decaying teeth.

"You fat ol' 'ypocrite! I 'ave you, I do!"

He lunged again, but I was more than ready for him. Dodging the blade by an arm's length, I saw with satisfaction that the wooden hilt wobbled with each thrust. I'd been to war. I'd killed my own father. With my bare hands. What had Runty Pete done? Cleaned horse shit from my stables. I

had the strength of William the Conqueror, a brutal man, ruthless, a man who cut off his enemies' hands and feet. Runty Pete had the strength of an eight-year-old jester.

He threw himself at me, no doubt thinking me so fat and feeble that I'd be an easy kill. This time, I didn't bother moving. Instead, I grabbed his wrist. The blade slashed the air a few inches from my stomach. The fist opened. The dagger fell. Still grasping him, I twisted, and his right arm wrenched with an audible *crack*.

He screamed in agony, his face engorged with blood.

I twisted again.

Crack.

And again.

Crack.

His arm dangled uselessly. His knees began to fold. I grabbed his shoulders and shoved him as hard as I could. Shrieking, he crashed against the table, and my headdress— *priceless, it was, for it was of Dagon, and how dare this weasel be in the same room with it!*—clunked to the rug.

"I didn't mean nothin'!" he wailed. "Mercy!"

"I'd have more mercy for you if you were a wet nurse to my dogs."

"I don't want no gold! Please, *please*!" He tried to shield his head with his good arm.

I stood over him and stared down.

Pathetic.

"The only difference between other vermin and you, Runty Pete, is that *they* are difficult to remove."

Wondering how long it would take my maids to scrub his remains off my rug, I reached for the mantel and grabbed the baselard that I'd been saving for a sacrifice. Medieval, with a crosspiece at the pommel, the dagger was still sharp, with a double-edged tapered blade. I gripped it, my knuckles red, my fingers tight.

The weasel cowered.

"No, master…"

Was he still begging?

No matter.

I raised the dagger high over his head.

"No, master!"

My vision blurred.

Burn it behind my eyes.
Burn it into my soul.
Burn it.
Gatekeepers and gardeners and tea boys—what did they know?
Runty Pete was but a stable boy, the lowliest of the low.

20

PETER SMYTHE-BARTON

Lord Wiltshram's Avebury mansion

The dagger gleamed o'er me eyes and descended. I rolled from its path just in time, and the blade ripped into the brocade of a chair.

Wiltshram grasped the 'andle with both fists and pulled.

"I'll get you yet, you weasel!" 'e screamed. "You won't take my gold… It belongs to Dagon! Fitzgerald will kill me if it's lost. You'll die for this, I swear!"

Me 'eart banged against me ribs 'til the bones 'urt. I gasped for breath. 'e'd broke me arm, wrenched it right out o' the socket, and it 'urt like 'ell.

But with the gold, I'd get a good doctor to patch me up. So I scampered for the 'all. I'd left the door ajar for quick escape.

Somethin' gurgled behind me. I stopped briefly and looked o'er me shoulder, and caught a flash o' 'im.

Heavin' and flushed—*maybe 'e'd die on the spot, and I could only 'ope*—'e wobbled and 'eld 'is belly, 'is mouth frothin' blood. Then 'e saw me peekin', and 'e growled and thundered after me like a roarin' lion. Just as I swiveled and made for the door, 'e came down on me, 'is arm raised, 'is fist grippin' the dagger.

I sidestepped the blade, quickly guessed the chance o' gettin' to the door alive—*none*—and raced toward the fireplace on the other end o' the room. Right away 'e bellowed after me, but I was much faster, and 'e was bloated, the bugger, on cakes and fancy teas.

Besides, I 'ad me own knife.

I'd planned to force 'im to give me the stash, and then I was goin' to kill 'im. 'adn't planned on a broken arm. I 'adn't planned on lettin' 'im grab that dagger off the mantel.

Fast as I could, I scooped me knife from the floor. The 'ilt was loose, but I was good with it, even with me left 'and. I'd slaughtered many a night animal with this blade, and slit the throats o' many a 'orse in the stables. They be sick, those 'orses, and Wiltshram knew not what to do about it.

Wiltshram's ugly breath was near me face. It smelled o' whiskey and tea as 'e tottered from foot to foot, face bright red, mouth blatherin'. Those stupid words 'e always shrieked as if anybody cared. It sounded like an infant's gibberish.

"Stable runt, I'll have your life for this!" 'e roared. "*Oooooocheck ooouh laaaahwww check-Ooooo*!"

Crazy as a man could be, but I'd have 'is gold. I'd missed 'im with me dagger, and I'd suffered for it, 'adn't I? This time, I wouldn't miss—'e 'adn't the life left in 'im to fight me. There was the diadem, 'is 'eaddress, on the floor, and I'd 'ave that, too, I would. It was worth a mighty sum.

'e knew it was comin' before I sent it 'ome.

"Wet nurse to your dogs?" I said. "A flea and a weasel, be me? Methinks not!"

With that I thrust me rusty blade, thrust it into 'is guts, but 'e was so fat the blade didn't go all the way through. I yanked it out and stuck it back into 'im, twistin' it as 'e 'ad twisted me shoulder, and 'e screamed like a newborn babe. Keeled over, clenchin' 'is gut.

As 'e dropped, I staggered back. I didn't want to be pinned beneath 'im. I'd ne'er get loose. Then 'is body 'it the floor with such force that the chairs popped up, and the rug wheezed dust. Down on 'is back, 'e writhed and screeched.

I had no 'eart for 'im—'ated Wiltshram and 'is kind. They be rich and mean.

They be nothin'.

"Rich man, you think your money saves you from the likes o' me?" I laughed, and then I skewered 'im in the 'eart, not once but thrice—and with each thrust, 'is innards squelched, a loud sloppin' noise. Same noise a 'orse makes, and a dog.

I straddled 'im, and 'is eyes beseeched me. They begged.

Fool.

'e'd get no mercy from the likes o' me. No more than 'e'd give. Me knife plunged straight through 'is mouth, deep to the throat where 'e stuffed all them cakes, and me knife pinned 'im to the floorboards beneath the rug.

I laughed again. It be an 'ysterical laugh, really, for I be not a cruel man. I don't like sufferin', even in one as 'e. And *yet*—'e 'ad it comin', 'e'd 'urt me bad, shown no mercy, 'e was a dog, less than a dog. The great Lord Wiltshram was nothin'.

So I pinned ’im, I did, like a bug on a mat. Like them rich men do with butterflies. I pushed down with all me weight ’til I could push no more.

Then I rolled off ’im, and I was pantin’ from the effort. Blood foamed on ’is lips. Blood bloated ’is eyes, and ’is nostrils and ears streamed blood.

I could see me bone in me broken arm, and the blood was awful fierce. Pain seared me flesh, *seared it*, and it all was ’is fault. But it was nothin’ compared to the pain *Wiltshram* felt. Nearly dead, but not quite, ’e was…

That stupid Fitzgerald entrusted the fat bugger with the gold. Little did Fitzgerald know that Wiltshram wasn’t to be trusted. No, ’e wasn’t a true believer—’e wanted the gold for ’imself. I’d over’eard ’em outside the stables. They’d not seen me, an advantage of me size.

“You hide it where only you and I will know,” Fitzgerald ’ad told Wiltshram. *“I’m afraid of theft during my absences. I’m rarely in one place,”* ’e said. *“I trust you. It’ll be safe here.”*

“Why not leave it in London?” What a sly, connivin’ voice Wiltshram ’ad.

“There are thieves everywhere, Wiltshram. In London, in Avebury, on the coast. You’re my top man here. It’s safest with you.”

Top man in Avebury? *Well, we’ll see about that now, won’t we?* I thought.

Weakened from me own injuries, throbbin’ with pain, still I knew I couldn’t leave ’im as ’e were. I almost felt sorry for ’im as I wrenched the dagger out o’ ’is mouth. *Almost*. One final plunge to the ’eart, and I tried to make the last one painless. As I said, I’m not a cruel bastard, not really.

Best it look like a madman broke in and killed ’im for the loot, I figured. So I cut ’im into a dozen pieces or more, I did, and I chopped ’is face so badly ’is own mother wouldn’t ’ave recognized ’im. I cut off ’is right arm and ’acked it at the wrist and elbow, and then I stacked ’is arm bones in the center o’ the rug.

Fittin’, I thought.

The fat ’ead was a bleedin’ mess, all chopped as it was. I squeezed ’is brain in me ’and and let it ooze between me fingers. *Such power*. It surged through me. I never felt such a thing before, and it scared me, it did.

The room reeked somethin’ awful, and I was anxious to be on me way. Besides, I ’ad to get me arm fixed. So I took the bronze crown-thing, and with me pockets stuffed with gold, I slipped from the ’ouse into the shadows.

21

DR. JOHN WATSON

The Ashberton estate, Avebury

“Give me that trumpet!” Lord Ashberton grabbed the blood-streaked instrument and yanked it from my hands. I stared in horror at what I’d done. A figure lay at my feet, his skull bashed in. I grasped the man’s wrist, and with much relief, felt a pulse.

“He’s still alive,” I said. “Get some help. Quick!”

Holmes rolled to his stomach, groaning.

“Watson. What happened?”

“You were beaten up by this… this *thug*,” I said indignantly, then I pointed an accusing finger at Ashberton. “This is your fault, sir. You called this man in to attack Mr. Sherlock Holmes. You will be held accountable.”

Ashberton cracked a smile.

“I merely picked up my trumpet and blew a few notes. I had no way of knowing that this man would burst into my parlor and attack your associate.”

I scowled.

“He is your man, is he not? What did you think he would do?”

“I thought he would protect me.” Ashberton shrugged. “In a non-violent way, of course.”

“I don’t believe you, sir,” I replied. “Now get your man some help. I need to attend to Mr. Holmes.”

Lady Ashberton sagged in her chair, having fainted dead away, and likely also required medical attention. *What a circus*, I thought. There was no way, as a medical man, I could leave the estate without first attending to the injured, and that included Holmes’s attacker. A medical man takes certain oaths.

Exasperated, I helped Holmes to his feet, and was thankful when he dusted himself off and assured me that Ashberton’s thug had left no damage. I wanted to ice his bruises, but he insisted that we be on our way.

Before we could do so, I waved smelling salts beneath Lady Ashberton's nose until she fluttered back to the living. While I tended to his wife, Ashberton disappeared into the recesses of his mansion. Shortly after, four men bustled into the room. Holmes and I both flinched, but thankfully, these four weren't assailants. They lifted Holmes's groggy attacker, and struggling, carried him into the hall.

I'd killed men in the war, and I feared that he would not last the night. Had it been necessary for me to injure him so severely? What else could I have done? I struggled with my conscience. The man might have a wife and children. And yet, I told myself, he need not have been in Ashberton's service, acting as a paid assassin.

Awake now, Lady Ashberton was too weak to lift herself from the chair and walk, and I hesitated to leave her. As I pondered the matter, one of Ashberton's men turned and called to Holmes.

"Word came from the Wiltshram estate, Mr. Holmes," he said. "Desperate word from his butler."

Pontose, I thought. He knew we were heading to see Lord and Lady Ashberton. What could he possibly want?

"What did he say?" Holmes demanded.

"He says you are to return immediately." The words were rushed—the men hurried to get their comrade to a bed, to a local doctor, wherever Ashberton had ordered them to carry him. "Lord Wiltshram, sir, he's been murdered!"

22

“Extra caution is required,” Holmes said. “Plus, this helps hide the cuts and bruises.”

“But why *this*?” I asked. “Is *this* really necessary?”

He stopped in his adjustment of my wig, stepped back, gazed, then pushed the disheveled mess lower on my forehead. His teeth jutted forward from the dental artifice he’d jammed beneath his upper lip, and he sucked his lower lip between them to complete the overbite effect. He boasted a lumpy nose and spectacles that provided the illusion of tiny, ill-spaced eyes. Wearing rags and a cap over his own matted black wig, he looked entirely the part of a workman from one of the nearby estates.

“A murderer remains on the loose,” he admonished. “We must exercise supreme caution. Pontose must want us to investigate the murder of his master—why else would he summon us? Indeed, he may fear that the police will pin the crime on him.”

I winced. The wig was tight on my head, and the pillow Holmes had strapped to my back beneath my shirt made my shoulders ache. The entire outfit itched—it was sewn from moth-eaten wool—and the stiff shoes hurt my toes.

“This is a strange turn. The remains were piled up as before, but there was something different about them,” he continued. “Flesh still clung to the bones, and there was no sphere. No, this doesn’t follow the pattern at all.” He scowled. “By now the police will have removed the evidence—I’ve seen to that.”

“Fitzgerald is most likely an accomplice to this crime,” I suggested. “He financed the tram machine. His London home is essentially a shrine to Dagon. Why not have the local authorities pick him up?” Before Holmes could answer, I added, “Never mind. I know. Of course. Because we have no proof of what Fitzgerald has or has not done. We can’t link him definitively to any of the murders.”

Holmes nodded quickly. “We must catch him in the act,” he said. “We must catch him *before* he acts. We need evidence, Watson.” He jerked my wig one last time, and giving us both a final glance of approval, he deemed us ready.

A full day had passed since our adventures at the Ashberton and Wiltshram estates, events that had left us exhausted. We'd not returned to the Wiltshram estate per Pontose's plea. Upon returning to our room, even Holmes had slept half the day, which was unusual for him when hot on a case. Typically his mind churned through details, keeping him awake for ungodly amounts of time. I'd known him to go two full days without a bit of rest, much less sleep, but the attack that left him bruised and battered had worn him down.

He'd covered the bruises with theatrical makeup, but he couldn't disguise the swelling around his eyes. Luckily, bruises and battering went well with the workmen we were about to imitate.

From our room at the Loggerheads, Holmes and I slipped down the back stairs to avoid Mrs. Hinds. The villagers were out in force, screaming in the streets about Druids and witchcraft and the murders that took place long ago in the Neolithic circle of stones called the Whispering Knights.

"Human sacrifice!" a woman cried. "Next they'll be wantin' our daughters!"

"Next they'll be killin' our wives!" a man said. The country police were no match for the people milling about with torches and demanding blood. We saw but two officers, and their clubs were impotent against the angry villagers, so they didn't linger for long.

Leaving our lodgings behind, we set off by foot to the outskirts of Avebury. A short time later, we found ourselves in a field, surrounded by monoliths.

"William Stukeley claimed that these huge stones were part of a Druidic serpent temple," Holmes said, waving at the objects. Approximately here —" he waved again "—was the south circle, which originally consisted of twenty-nine massive stones and an even larger center stone called the Obelisk."

"What happened to the Obelisk? I don't see anything out there."

"Stukeley's 1723 engravings show that the giant had fallen. How it fell, he did not recount. His engravings also show three large entrance stones. Interesting, Watson, how the twenty-nine stones of the south circle stood thirty-six feet apart from one another." He eyed me, clearly waiting for my reaction.

It didn't take long, for I knew what he meant.

“All multiples of three!” I exclaimed. “Twenty-nine stones plus the Obelisk equals thirty. The stones are thirty-six feet apart.” When Holmes nodded, I asked, “But the Obelisk is gone… *Where* could it have gone, how could anyone have moved it, and why would anyone move such a massive object?”

“They hacked it to pieces. Then they moved the debris, and they incorporated the stones into the village buildings. As is often the case with national treasures, people saw little immediate worth, and did not care about the Obelisk’s true value.”

“Whatever that may be,” I remarked. “And what of this ‘serpent temple’?”

Holmes pulled a scrap of paper and a stub of pencil from his tattered cloth jacket. He scribbled, then showed me the results. A large circle made of stones surrounded two inner circles of stones.

“You see the inner circles,” said Holmes. “One is called the south circle, and the other the north circle. The north circle also contained stones in a multiple of three.”

Two meandering paths, their sides marked by more of these giant stones, roped down in long avenues. The whole thing had the look of an octopus with two tentacles, rather than a serpent. When I pointed this out, Holmes said nothing but nodded.

My leg ached, my feet hurt, and I noticed that Holmes limped slightly, as well. We truly appeared to be two down-on-their-luck workmen in need of a break. We hobbled on, and eventually swung down a narrow lane, which Holmes told me led to Professor Henry Fitzgerald’s estate.

“Druidic influence is still quite strong in these parts,” he said. “Many people have ancestors who lived here, as well. These stone circles contain triangular features. Various surveyors from around here claim that a precise 3-4-5 triangle, what they call a ‘Druids’ triangle,’ spans the south and north circles.”

“To the ancients, these stones probably represented day versus night, winter versus summer,” I suggested. “*Time*, Holmes.”

“Time, yes, but also geometry… *space*. We see both here, don’t we? Space *and* time. All within the constructs of Druidic multiples of three.”

“But as Ashberton was quick to say, what does any of this have to do with the murders in London?”

“I don’t know,” my friend admitted. “This is the mystery before us—yet they must be connected. Fitzgerald boasts, if that is the proper word, a Druidic lineage. Of course, he and his ilk are probably modern neo-Druids, for how could he possibly trace his ancestors back to the prehistoric Druids? Fitzgerald lives here in Avebury, as well as in London, and apparently, his associates include Ashberton and the sadly deceased Wiltshram. All claim ardent Druidic beliefs. Writings on the topic include mentions of space and time, odd dimensions and supernatural deities, and the manipulation of energy lines and fertility—”

“—enough to make you conclude that there’s a connection,” I interjected, finishing his thought. “Holmes, do you think these Druids are killing people as sacrifices to this god they call Dagon?”

We circumvented a copse of oaks at the back of an estate twice the size of either Ashberton’s or Wiltshram’s. Professor Fitzgerald’s mansion was five stories high and constructed of solid stone. Windows were iron-grilled jots on the giant façade. Weak light, as if from candles, filtered from several ground-floor windows. The moonlight fell into the trees and disappeared. A chill curled around me, and I shivered.

Holmes was a dark shadow by my side.

“It’s possible that the Druids are killing people as sacrifices,” he said, “but I frankly can’t see a connection. Your theory doesn’t explain the tram system. Why would a Druid construct a tram system in London? And why kill people in the city rather than here, surrounded by their water springs, their ancient oaks, and their arcane shrines?”

He lowered his voice.

“Come. Through the back door, Watson. Make haste.”

We slipped into the mansion and found ourselves in a vast kitchen populated by a clutch of red-faced women wearing soiled aprons. From the size of them, the cooks and kitchen staff enjoyed sampling their wares. Several looked up at us with suspicion.

“And you are…?” a stout woman asked, brandishing a kitchen knife. However, Holmes was fully in his tramp identity. With trembling hands, he swiped his cap from his head. His lower lip hidden deep beneath his upper teeth, his mouth made little sucking noises as he talked.

“You are needin’ laborers, we ’ear,” he said. “It took us a day to get ’ere from up north.”

The cook clanked the knife on a wooden table. She seemed to have no trouble understanding Holmes's words.

"Yea, well, you are right, lads. We always need laborers 'ere, but not 'til morn." She broke into laughter, and the cooks surrounding her laughed nervously. When she stopped and glared at us, the others followed suit.

"We are sorry for the lateness, ma'am." Holmes cracked a smile, and his eyes lit up behind the warped lenses.

"You are a gnarled ol' brute. And looky your frien' 'ere, 'e be quite a dasher, eh?"

I felt my face burn red, and all I could think was, *if my Mary had seen me like this—hunchbacked, filthy, hair fit only to roost crows—she never would have married me*.

At that moment, Holmes toppled over and clutched his chest.

"Oh, the pain, ladies!" He rolled to his side and groaned. "It must be me 'eart!" The cook and her flock took to him right away. Kneeling, offering help, fetching a whiskey bottle from the far cabinet.

As they busied themselves with Holmes, I hobbled from the kitchen, and groping damp walls, made my way down a long hallway reeking of must and mold. I had no candle to light the way, and it wasn't long before the light from the kitchen winked from view. Careful not to slip on the uneven stones, I picked up my speed. Turning corner after corner, I passed what I assumed to be a staircase leading to the servants' quarters, and shortly after, a closed door.

Two voices filtered into range, distant at first, and then louder. I crept closer, stopped when the narrow hallway widened. A wall sconce several yards ahead flickered, revealing a wide-planked floor adorned with a thin yet intricately woven rug. The walls, while still stone, were dry in this area of the mansion and draped with thick tapestries.

"What makes you think the Others might have taken Lord Wiltshram?" The cultured baritone belonged to Professor Fitzgerald. Treading slowly, I inched forward. Even the creak of a floorboard would attract the men's attention, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Gothic arches stretched over a doorway from which more light flickered dimly. Statues of multi-limbed creatures, their heads chiseled into geometric patterns, guarded both sides of the entrance. I crouched by the one nearest me as the second voice spoke, deep and loud.

"Stacks of bones. Body hacked to pieces. Intestines piled up."

Just hearing that voice sent chills up my spine. I pictured him, the cheeks in folds, the matted beard and shaggy hair, the overstuffed body, the iron trumpet raised valiantly in one hand as the would-be assassin of Sherlock Holmes dashed into view. My hand slipped into my coat pocket. My fingers curled around the butt-end of my pistol.

Fitzgerald didn't know who killed Wiltshram, and neither did Lord Ashberton. And yet…

Could it be?

My heart raced, as did my thoughts.

Wiltshram's corpse was found just like the others. Hacked, mutilated, bones stacked, insides left heaped in mounds.

What were we up against?

23

“But there were no symbols,” Fitzgerald said, echoing my thoughts, “no bone spheres, and no gold…” His voice trailed off, and I dared to steal a glance.

“What have you done with the remains,” Fitzgerald demanded abruptly, “and where the hell is my gold? It’s invaluable, you know that—a gift from Dagon, showered upon us by the Jacobs machine. It’s unlike any other gold, and I must have it back.”

Ashberton’s puffy face blanched. He untied his velvet cape and tossed it aside. With a frilly white sleeve, he mopped the sweat off his forehead.

“I certainly don’t know,” he protested. “You left the gold with Wiltshram, not with me.”

“He never told you?”

“No. Never.”

“*Pontose! Get in here!*” Fitzgerald yelled, and fear rippled through me. I stood next to the only visible entrance. If Pontose showed up, he’d see me. I had to get away. Immediately.

Backing away from the room, I ignored the pain in my leg and hurried down the corridor. I opened a door near the kitchen, ducked inside, then clicked the door shut. Judging from the smell, I was in a pantry of sorts. The sweetness of baked breads mingled with the pungency of pickles and dried fish. Dust tickled my nose, and my eyes teared up. I squeezed my nose to keep from sneezing. It was torture, fearing I would sneeze and give myself away.

Footsteps clambered down the stairs I’d passed earlier, and muttering, Pontose scurried down the hall past my hiding place. When his footsteps receded, I slipped from the pantry, gulped the stale air of the musty hallway, and stealthily returned to my position behind the tentacled statue.

“No, I’ve told nobody, sir,” Pontose protested. “*Nobody!* Though soon enough, my master will be missed—if he hasn’t been already.”

Fitzgerald grabbed the butler by his lapels and shook him, hard. Ashberton seized a hot-glowing poker in his meaty paw, and scowling, advanced on their captive. Fitzgerald threw him to the floor, then reached down, grabbed his lapels again, and yanked him back to his feet.

“Where’s Wiltshram’s body, Pontose?” he demanded. “Someone removed it from his estate. *Where is it?*”

“I-I don’t know, sir, I-I swear!”

Ashberton’s poker stopped a few inches from the butler’s terrified face.

“What did you do with the corpse?” he growled. Part of me wanted to jump from hiding and reveal the part we had played, but I stayed my hand.

“I-I sent a horseman to town to get the police, sir,” he said. “And I didn’t tell anyone, I swear, not even the horseman. I told the servants to stay clear of the sitting room, and I let the police take the master away. I don’t know where they took him. Cemetery? Police station? Hospital?”

“Ha! Certainly not the hospital!” Ashberton roared with wicked laughter.

“You said he was hacked up,” Fitzgerald said.

“H-he was, sir. His bones was stacked among the bloody remains.”

“No bone spheres?”

“No, sir, there be none.”

“You saw nobody else there?” Fitzgerald persisted.

“Only Runty Pete—he came in as I left for ale.”

“Runty Pete, eh?” Fitzgerald exchanged a deadly glance with Ashberton. “That could explain it—and now, we have the table. I had my men bring it here. Perhaps it will yield some answers, as well.” He waved Ashberton aside and released his grip on Pontose’s collar. The butler wriggled free, and they stepped over to the object we had seen in Wiltshram’s study near the body.

“Open the drawer,” Fitzgerald commanded.

“Yes. Yes, sir,” Pontose said. “I mean, I’ll try, sir. I don’t know the exact method.” When Ashberton raised the poker again, he added, “I’ll do my best.”

Ashberton reluctantly set the poker back in its rack by the fireplace while Pontose set to work, jabbing something on the bottom drawer. The butler was shaking, and when he looked over his shoulder and addressed Fitzgerald and Ashberton, his eyes were wide with panic.

“I c-cannot do it,” he stammered. “Lord Wiltshram k-kept the numbers secret.”

Fitzgerald hauled the butler to his feet, shoved him aside, and took his place, squatting by the drawer.

“If you want anything done right, you have to do it yourself,” he fumed. The numbers he muttered seemed familiar as he jabbed what appeared to be

the lock.

"300000 437 500 197 207 82 79 18 16…

"437 500…

"197 207 82…"

…and various other sequential combinations.

"Idiot Wiltshram!" he bellowed, and he slapped the drawer with the palm of his hand. "Why didn't the man do as I told him?"

"H-he did," Pontose exclaimed. "H-he always did." Fitzgerald trained his sharp black eyes on the butler, then returned to the job at hand. He muttered the numbers again, this time in reverse order.

"16 18 79 82 207 197 500 437 300000…"

Nothing.

He jabbed again.

"500 437 300000…"

Nothing.

Again.

Abruptly, the drawer slid open. Fitzgerald rocked back on his heels and muttered "at last," but his relieved expression quickly turned dark. He jumped to his feet and grabbed Pontose again, this time shaking him violently.

"*Where's my gold?*" he roared. "You must know where he put it! Tell me or pay with your *life*!" Ashberton's face brightened as he snatched the poker, heated it to glowing, and held it beneath the butler's nose.

"Once up each nostril," he said, "and then I go for the eyes. I suggest you pony up that money, butler, and make it speedy."

Watching the horrible drama unfold, I could no longer remain still, allowing Fitzgerald and Ashberton to torture Pontose, and most likely, kill him. Clearly, Pontose had no knowledge of the gold's whereabouts. He was so frightened that, had he known anything, he would have blurted it out long ago.

Ashberton was a sadist. As for Fitzgerald, he was one of those charismatic men who liked to be in charge at any cost. I didn't know how much gold they were talking about, but it had to be a lot for him to react so strongly.

Without giving much thought to what they would do when they saw me, I pulled myself up using the statue and staggered into the room. I made

myself look bewildered, as if I'd gotten lost in this huge mansion. I took the cap from my head and held it contritely in both hands.

As one, they stopped and stared, but none of the men recognized me. Holmes's insistence on my disguise was paying off, and I'd been wrong to question his expertise in such matters.

We formed a triangle—Fitzgerald, Ashberton, and I— with Pontose situated between the other two. I tried to calculate the accuracy if I twice fired my gun—once to hit Fitzgerald and the second time toward Ashberton. There was no way to do it without risking a bullet to Pontose.

Had Ashberton been a smaller man, or Fitzgerald shorter and less muscled, I might have attempted to tackle them. But together, they would prove too formidable. I was in good shape, but had a wounded leg and was far from my prime.

Neither man wavered. If anything, the poker inched more closely toward Pontose's left nostril.

"And you are…?" Fitzgerald growled.

"I am the new stable 'elp, master," I said, disguising my voice. "I come for some sup, but there be none this late." I lowered my eyes, trying to appear meek.

"Well, the kitchen is nowhere near here. Find your way back and leave us. Immediately." Yet as if I hadn't even heard him, I sank into a chair and fanned myself with the cap.

"I am weak for me sup," I said. "I've 'ad no meal for two days."

"Well, then, if you're so weak, how did you find your way *here*?" Ashberton boomed. "You must have come in through the kitchen."

"I did, master, but that were awhile ago. I drink aplenty, and I went off down the dark 'all. I know not where I be, and I know not why. I be drunk, sir, and 'ungry, and now I am tired."

With a foul grimace, Fitzgerald gestured to his companion, and Ashberton once again returned the poker to the fireplace. The Professor then turned to Pontose.

"Get this fool out of here," he growled, and he leaned in close to the butler. "You find that gold, and bring it to me. I don't care if it was you who took it—I don't abide thievery. I want it *back*."

"Yessir, yessir, yessir." Pontose nodded profusely, pulled me to my feet, and shuttled me from the room. His suit was drenched in sweat. As we

turned the corner past the statue, I stopped and listened, ignoring the butler's silent pleas.

"We'll deal with him later," Fitzgerald said. "Just now we have to get to the shrine and attend to Norma." Before I could determine who "Norma," was, however, Pontose gave me a fierce tug. As we shuffled down the dark hallway, there was a fading reference to "the shrine by the sacred spring." Then we were too far away to hear more.

I stayed true to my role all the way back to the kitchen. Pontose never guessed that I wasn't a stray stableman lost in the big house. Perhaps he was consumed by his own fears, the near loss of his nostrils and his life, the threat of murder if he didn't cough up Fitzgerald's gold.

Most likely, he was planning his own escape, for no sooner had he pointed to the kitchen lights ahead in the hall than he bounded up the servants' stairs, leaving me on my own. I doubted I would see him again.

24

“Why, I never ’ad such fine kidney!” Holmes patted his belly and beamed, and the cook and her flock glowed. One of them pushed a plate of pie toward him, and urged him to try it.

“It’s meat and potato,” she said, “and I made it meself.”

My stomach growled, making me realize that I couldn’t remember when Holmes and I had last shared a meal. And here he was, scruffy and filthy in full beggar’s regalia, charming Fitzgerald’s household staff into feeding and pampering him. I wouldn’t be so lucky, however. I could charm women in my natural mode, but in this disguise, I wouldn’t have been able to charm Mary.

Holmes noticed me, and for a moment his eyes glinted with keen intelligence, then receded back to the glazed stare that he sported so well.

“Well, I must be off,” he said. “We’ll sleep in the stables tonight and see you fine lasses in the morn.”

“Oh, yes, please do!”

“We’ll ’ave fresh eggs and sausage.”

They fluttered all around him, faces flushed, smiles displaying chipped and missing teeth. The cook shooed the girls off him, and wrapped her own arm over his shoulder.

“’e’s mine, girls. I am in charge, and I get first choice.”

I was speechless.

Sometimes Holmes could read human personalities the way I read the morning *Times*. He was able to tap into the core of a person’s being, then play to it in the most charming and devious manner. He turned at the door leading outside, flashed the ladies a smile, and then I followed him from Fitzgerald’s mansion into the night.

“I hope you thoroughly enjoyed yourself,” I said, “while I risked life and limb to save Pontose from the wrong end of a hot poker.”

“Indeed, I learned quite a bit from those fine ladies, Watson,” he said far too cheerfully. “You’d be surprised how much the household staff know about the doings in a house—and they live to gossip.”

As we returned to the Loggerheads, the village was quiet. No more bellowing villagers, just the rustling of nocturnal creatures. I gave a full

account of my activities to Holmes, and he told me all he had discovered by flirting with the cook and the kitchen maids.

Apparently, Fitzgerald claimed descent from an ancient line of Druids and believed himself to be divinely ordained to lead people, even sacrifice them at the Druidic altar— *Not that 'e's e'er done that*, the maids were quick to add. *'e says it is 'is right by breedin', though*.

There was that word again. *Breeding*. It was a word used by the royals and uppercrust… but by Fitzgerald? He wasn't a baron, duke, or earl, not that I recollected.

Holmes continued telling me about his charming interlude with the kitchen staff.

"'e says 'e mead… mead… what's the word? Meadates?" the cook had asked.

"Mediates," Holmes had suggested.

"Yes, the Professor says 'e meadates with the spirits who enter our world. 'e says 'is ancestors passed down a drawin' o' a Druid shrine, and that 'e is able to recreate the shrine exactly as it's supposed to be. Somethin' about angles and geometers."

"Geometries," Holmes had said, then he asked, "And where is this shrine?"

"By Swallowhead Spring, between Silbury 'ill and West Kennet Long Barrow. For thousands o' years, Druids buried the dead in the barrow. Energies be there, fertility lines cross. The Professor says the Others live beneath the earth there." With that, Holmes finished his account.

"We should go there in the morning," I told him. "This may be where Fitzgerald's men are meeting this Norma person, whoever she may be."

"*Norma*! Don't you remember, Watson? We heard 'Casta Diva,' the fine soprano aria, at the Loggerheads!"

Of course! "Yes, how could I possibly forget that night?" I replied. "*Norma* interspersed with the bizarre caterwauling." The very thought sent a shiver down my spine.

"Another connection," my companion muttered. "Fitzgerald may be referring to *Norma* set by the ancient sacred springs. You do realize how *Norma* is associated with the Druids?" I nodded. In the performance, "Norma" herself was the high-priestess of the Druids.

"Let us hope they stick to Vincenzo Bellini's version rather than supplement it with human sacrifice," I said.

“I wonder who Fitzgerald is getting to play the lead,” Holmes said. “It’s one of the most demanding soprano roles in the Italian repertoire.” He quoted from the opera. “‘The time is not ripe. Blood, blood, revenge!’ And then there are the trumpets.’”

At the mention of trumpets, I winced.

“We can only hope that Fitzgerald,” I said, “with all his arrogance, doesn’t try to sing the role of Oroveso, the arch-druid, Norma’s father. That would make for an awful show, would it not?” But Holmes was no longer listening to me. His mind had jumped elsewhere.

“Wiltshram’s killer was a thief. He wanted the gold, and so the murder differs dramatically from those in London. No symbols chiseled on the bones. No gold deposits. No spherical bones… Even the three corpses found in the alley by the tram building had the bizarre symbols chiseled on their bones and the strange spherical bones nearby. Whoever killed Theodore Jacobs killed those three, I would say. The police say that all four murders happened within the space of very little time.” And then his mind whirled back to the present.

“This business with Professor Fitzgerald is what intrigues me the most,” he continued. “He may be our man, Watson. There are too many coincidences tying him to the East End murders, and yet, I cannot attribute anything directly to him. Nor do I know *why* he would engineer such grisly events. What does he hope to gain? But yes, you’re correct, Doctor, that we should pursue Professor Henry Fitzgerald. We should proceed to Swallowhead Spring and watch his every move.”

Holmes said nothing more about the Professor’s belief that he was servicing spirits at his shrine. Like myself, Holmes didn’t believe in ghosts, ghouls, or spirits of any kind. Just the *human* spirit, which can devise and inflict sufficient evil on its own, without otherworldly assistance.

Climbing the stairs to our room, we made plans to travel to Swallowhead Spring in the morning.

*

We slept soundly and awoke as refreshed as our uncomfortable beds would allow. As Mrs. Hinds served us a feast of eggs, toast and jam, sausages, and tea, she handed Holmes a sealed envelope.

“From London,” she said, “a telegram, Mr. Holmes.”

He set down his fork and ripped it open.

“Another killing in the East End!” he cried. “Lestrade wants us back in London, post haste, for he believes Moriarty is behind the murders.”

Professor Moriarty? *But how can that be?* Nothing we had seen in Wiltshire even hinted at his involvement.

And yet I remembered how the fiend had tricked Mary with his note, bringing them to the market where she and Samuel might have died in the tram fire. Perhaps he *was* at the center of it all. Perhaps he was in cahoots with Fitzgerald and Ashberton. Perhaps and perhaps.

We ate quickly, paid Mrs. Hinds in full, then set off for London. I was anxious to see Mary and Samuel. God help me if anything had happened to them while I was racing around the countryside with Holmes.

I’d never forgive myself.

25

She was young, beautiful. Blonde hair arranged into a braided halo, disarrayed helter-skelter over shut eyes. Her white limbs were horribly bruised, both arms broken, one leg smashed from the knee down. A foul smell filled the air in the stark room.

Who would do such a thing?

“Her dress and bodice were intact when we found her,” Lestrade said, pointing to the body on the examining table. We had come to the mortuary straight from the train. “This was no rape. Nor was it a robber. Her purse is over there by the wall.” Holmes bent over the girl and studied her face.

“A street girl, by the looks of it,” Lestrade said. He took a long draw from his cigarette, squinted his already beady eyes, and hunched up his shoulders as if this would elevate his stature.

“No,” Holmes told Lestrade, “the clothes are cut from fine cloth and stitched with precision. She wears no cosmetics, only a dusting of white powder as evidenced by this smudge on her chin.” Using his fingers, he parted the woman’s eyelids. “Even in death, her eyes have a softness that one doesn’t see on the common street walker.”

Lestrade stiffened. While he and Holmes enjoyed a healthy rivalry, Holmes typically came out on top. Lestrade was a distant second. He needed Holmes, and more times than he likely admitted even to himself, it was the great detective’s insights that solved Scotland Yard’s toughest cases. Thankfully, Holmes didn’t mind if Lestrade took credit. My friend’s interests lay exclusively in the chase— hunting down the clues, cobbling them together, pegging the culprit, and pinning him down. Holmes had no interest in fame.

“But why would a lady be there on Thrawl Street?” Lestrade said.

“Because the market is nearby,” I suggested, “and it’s a fairly simple matter to grab a girl on the edge of the crowd and bring her there. She may have been drugged.”

“Yes,” Holmes said. “An autopsy might show evidence of drugs, if there are any. No matter, Inspector. I have no interest in this girl.”

“Come now, Holmes. She was killed on the very street where Willie Jacobs has his tram machine.”

“It doesn’t matter. The crime is of a different nature, as you pointed out to me in your telegram. Tell me, why do you think Moriarty is behind this killing?” Holmes asked brusquely.

Lestrade looked smug, and waved us to one of his underlings. The young man opened an evidence case and showed us what appeared to be a gold collar button.

“It’s solid gold, the real thing,” the policeman said, stroking his beard and running a hand through his brown hair. I didn’t recognize him. Perhaps he’d recently transferred to the Yard from further afield.

Holmes gazed at the button. A solid gold button was an oddity, but nothing implied that it belonged to Moriarty. He flipped it over.

“Ah! I see… the initial ‘M.’” He shot Lestrade a glance, and nodded at me. “This proves nothing. Anyone could have placed this button at the scene, and the letter M can stand for any number of names. Michael, Madison, Martin, Mitchell, Moore.”

Yet Lestrade retained his self-satisfied air.

“There was this note,” the bearded policeman said, and he handed a scrap of paper to Holmes. Looking highly amused, my friend read the note aloud.

“‘This is what will happen,’” he read, “‘if Mr. Sherlock Holmes stays on the case.’” Waving the scrap in front of us all, he added, “Signed… ‘*M.*’”

“I’ll admit it’s peculiar for a criminal to leave a calling card so obvious,” Lestrade said, “and yet, what other conclusion can we draw?”

Holmes bowed. “You are correct—it *is* most peculiar,” he said. “No, Inspector, Moriarty did not leave this note. He would never stoop to anything this obvious, and so patently idiotic.” At this, Lestrade turned an odd shade of pink.

“It makes no sense for Moriarty to kill some random woman,” Holmes continued. “Even more to the point—”

“From what Holmes has told me, he kills only with motive—something clear to gain, and he’s very clever,” I added.

“Without more information, there’s nothing to tell us who killed this poor woman, and why,” Holmes said briskly. “For the moment, however, we must assume that this killing has nothing to do with Willie Jacobs.” He shot the Inspector a hard look. “Our return to London has been a waste of time.”

Fueled by his words, I was itching to leave. As Holmes finished with Lestrade, we hailed a carriage that would take us to my flat. I was happy to

head home—first, to remove myself from the smell of rotting flesh, and second, to make sure Mary and Samuel were all right.

*

My first clue was the gas. I smelled it on the landing by the front door to the building. It was faint and could have emanated from anybody's flat, but instinct told me that the source was my own home.

Holmes shot up the stairs and banged on the door, calling my wife's name. I was on his heels, dreadful thoughts and images roiling through my mind. Mary, bloody and mangled on the floor just like the young girl from the mortuary. Samuel, limp on her breast, eyes closed, face placid in death. God, it was unbearable.

"Perhaps she's out with the baby," Holmes offered. "She's not answering my calls, neither is she coming to the door." The expression on his face, however, told me he thought otherwise—that foul play was afoot.

"Move!" I said, and as my friend shifted sideways, I dug the key from my pocket and stuck it in the lock. To my surprise, the door was already unlocked.

I slammed my body against the door, it crashed inward, and I flew into the room, frantically searching for Mary and Samuel.

"Mary," I cried, "Mary!"

Then I saw her.

Slumped in the rocking chair, hunched over. The baby lay at her feet.

Samuel was never still. Even in sleep, the baby twitched and stirred, his little fingers flexing, his mouth sucking, his lungs gently tugging away. He was never this quiet, never.

Holmes whipped a cloth from his pocket and held it over his nose, and I did likewise. The gas was thick in the room.

A scuffling in the bedroom…

A lamp—*gas*—clunked to the floor.

"Holmes," I whispered harshly, but he was ahead of me, racing for the bedroom while I lifted my child and carried him down the stairs and outside. Then I raced back upstairs and carried Mary to safety. She stirred in the fresh air, and Samuel whimpered and choked.

Holmes shouted for me.

Furniture breaking, a man cursing, fists hammering.

Dare I leave my family?

I propped Mary by the front door. Her lashes fluttered but then her eyes cleared, and she gazed at me, then picked up Samuel, clasping him closely to her chest. She stroked his head and whispered to him, peering up at me as if checking that it was really me, here in the flesh. She wore the heart-shaped locket I'd given to her on our wedding night. Gold with one diamond, it had cost me all that I had back then. Inside I'd tucked a photo of myself—dashing, handsome, ten years younger. She'd called me extravagant, but adored it anyway.

"Mary…" How could I explain away my absence? How could I make it up to her? Oh, what she must think—that I was perhaps unfaithful. She deserved much better.

Upstairs, a body crashed to the floor. Mary flinched.

"Fancy-pants man!" someone snarled. "Go back where you belong!"

"Watson!" Holmes bellowed. "*Watson!*"

"Will you be all right?" I asked my wife. She stared at me as if to say, *So you care about me now, all of a sudden? I've been fine without you all this time, so what do you think?* At least, that's what I imagined her thinking, for if our roles had been reversed, I'd certainly doubt *her* sincerity. "I'll be right back, I promise," I said, and with that, I bounded back up the stairs to our flat.

Holmes staggered in the center of the room and pointed to a bulky, unshaven beast of a man who was halfway to the bedroom door.

"Get him!" Holmes cried. The man turned. He wielded a knife in one huge paw.

I held my breath. Gas roiled from the kitchen. It was much worse than it had been only a few minutes earlier. We had arrived just in the nick of time.

Holmes's face was red, and one eye was swollen shut. He still wore his overcoat, having had no time to strip it off during the heat of the attack. The man with the knife hurled himself at my friend, who reeled and tottered and almost fell. He regained his balance as the thug came at him again, and kicked out so that he landed a blow on his attacker's jaw.

The knife dropped as the man's body flew upward, waist bent slightly, arms extended. He landed with a thud, and then roared and threw himself back at Holmes.

An expert boxer, Holmes drew back his fists, and then cracked the man's jaw, first on the left side, then on the right. The man clearly wasn't expecting a blow to the left side of his face as Holmes's opening maneuver.

He looked startled as the first blow landed, but didn't recover his senses quickly enough to retaliate before Holmes's right blow struck home.

The unshaven head snapped back and, stunned, the man grasped the baby's pram for support, only to find that it rolled… and that *he* rolled with it. Holmes circled him, fists raised, and as the man turned back to him, Holmes whipped his fingers at the man's eyes. He landed a powerful finger jab right beneath an eye, missing his mark.

I jumped into the fray, grabbing the man's jacket and yanking him away from Holmes. The assailant smiled, and I saw that his teeth had been filed into razor-sharp weapons. He clamped his mouth on my forearm and bit down hard.

It felt as if a row of icepicks had plunged into my flesh.

Blood soaked my shirt and jacket. He unclamped his teeth, and I clutched my hurt arm. The assailant moved in for the kill.

He dove at me, icepick teeth bared, and I bolted. Holmes whirled, thrust his leg out again, and kicked the side of the man's head. But the blow wasn't as strong as it might have been—my friend's strength was sapped, and the dense gas wasn't helping matters. I was choking from it. Luckily, our assailant was breathing that same gas, and feeling its same effects. All three of us sputtered and coughed as we staggered, circled each other, and growled—like three animals on a circus stage, I thought.

However, there was nothing amusing about the situation—this was *no* circus. It was life or death. This man was in *my* home. He had threatened *my* family.

If I have to, I will kill you, I thought.

The assailant snatched up his knife. Again, he threw himself at Holmes.

His knife plunged.

Holmes!

Leaping on the man's back, I threw both of my arms around his neck in a choke-hold. I squeezed as hard as I could, fully aware that I might kill him.

His elbows cracked back and slammed into my sides. Pain sliced across me from both angles. I fell, only to see the man whirl and lift the knife over Holmes's heart.

In seconds, my friend would be dead.

My revolver!

But I didn't dare use it, not with the gas in the room.

I wrenched the knife from the man and thrust it hard into his stomach.

He screamed and clenched his abdomen… and for an unbalanced moment, I thought, *he's bleeding on Mary's carpet*.

Holmes gasped for air. He made a half-circle around the man, then brutally kicked him in the ribs, eliciting a cry of rage and pain.

"Who else was with you?" Holmes said.

The man groaned and coughed.

I grabbed Holmes and pulled him back.

"He tried to kill your family," Holmes gritted. "He tried to gas them." Struggling, he broke away from me, and kicked the man again. "Who hired you?" he demanded.

I ran into the kitchen. Gas billowed from a broken pipe poking out of the floor next to the oven. The landlord had told me to keep a wrench on hand when I'd first rented the flat.

"Newfangled," he'd said. *"You never know what gas will do."* Well, now I knew. I grabbed my wrench from a drawer, squeezed it around the valve on the protruding pipe, and turned off the gas flow.

Why, I thought fiercely. *Why did he do this? Why not kill them outright?* Then I noticed something else.

In the corner behind the table, a body lay prostrate on the floor. Coughing, my body wracked with spasms, I shoved the table aside and hoisted the body up by the shoulders. It was a man. He wore my clothes. Blood glistened on open cuts beneath both eyes. His balding head bore scabs, as did the lower portion of his face.

Willie Jacobs. Mary's attacker had beaten Jacobs, and badly. God help me, was he alive?

I dragged him around the table—had to get him out of the thick gas and into the outer room, where it was easier to breathe. Luckily, he was light, but still there wasn't much room in my kitchen, and the space between the wall and the table was tight. When his body slammed against a table leg, he flinched and stirred.

He was alive!

I could hear the intruder sputtering and choking in my sitting room. Every word seemed an insurmountable struggle.

"Only me. No others."

"Why the gas?" Holmes said.

It took a while for the man to choke out the answer. Even then, it came in spurts.

“Me orders. Sneak in the open bedroom window, go to the kitchen, ax the gas, and get out.” A pause. “But she saw me, and I ’ad to ’it ’er. She started crawlin’ away, and before I could stop ’er, a man threw ’imself on me neck.” Another pause, and then he finished, “By the time I dealt with ’im, the woman and baby looked done for, and I went for me escape.”

That must have been when Holmes burst in.

I dragged Willie Jacobs to the landing outside the flat. Air hissed in and out of his blood-encrusted nostrils. I slapped Jacobs’s face a few times to revive him, and his eyes fluttered. Inside my flat, Holmes continued to grill the assailant.

“Your boss wanted to *kill* Mrs. Watson?” he said. “And her son?”

“No. Not kill. Didn’t count on ’er seein’ me. Didn’t count on that man bein’ ’ere. Me boss figured she’d leave. Figured it’d be a warnin’.” His face tightened with pain.

“To whom? Me?”

“Yes. Stop your case, or suffer the consequences.”

“Who issued these orders? *Who?*” As I returned to what was left of my sitting room—most of my furniture was overturned and broken—the assailant tried to answer. But he seemed beyond speaking.

“*Mmm*,” he said. “*Mmm.*… ”

That was the last sound he uttered.

26
KOENRAAD THWAITE

Half Moon Bay

They huddled on the cliffs. Sat on black boulders with water to their knees. Some shuffled their feet, crunching the rock rubble beneath their shoes. The most devout followers crouched in the cold water, shivering, submerged to their necks. All of these people had one thing in common.

All were mine.

I cared not for their petty human selves. I cared only for what they represented and how I could use them to open the way. Of course, if I could get a thrill from the experience, I wouldn't mind it. But I couldn't do *it* with just anyone.

She had to be sterile, ready for incubation, ready to host the Great One.

My black robe hid my excitement. It would be best to mate with a prime female before I grabbed someone random from the water.

"Hurry it up," I growled. "You're taking too long."

Richard Mapleton looked nervous. He didn't want me to choose Amelia Scarcliffe—wanted her for himself. She was one of the few loyal devotees who worshiped Lord Dagon as much as he did. Mapleton had already given Amelia a cottage, as well as all of the flowers for her shop. He worshiped her.

Amelia was ripe, succulent, as much a flower as those she sold in her shop, and only last week she'd proven herself more than worthy when she'd dispensed with old Mrs. Chatham, whose time had more than come. The crone had polluted the fragrance of mistletoe and flowers that cascaded down these cliffs and buzzed in the woods beyond. *Buzz*. I heard them now.

Choose wisely. Breed until you succeed.

Breed. Breed. Breed. It saturated the air like the buzz of crickets.

Amelia sat on one of the boulders closest to shore. Her face tilted toward the dying sun, which spilled orange across her features, lighting her eyes with fire. Her long, black hair whipped in the wind as the waves behind her rolled and broke across the backs of the females waiting farther out. Her body begged to birth a Great One. Wide hips and strong thighs and lush neck flaps.

Could she be *the One*? Did she possess the ancestry of *Beyond*?

I could understand Mapleton's lust, for I also felt it, but I suppressed mine fully in deference to the great cause. It was best to channel the totality

of one's worship to Dagon. One could admire and use, but one should always remember the place of the female.

Mapleton strode among the other females. He kept turning, raising his eyebrows, and I kept shaking my head, *No*. I knew all the females in this part of the country. I had to have the one with greatest potential, and even then, I knew the chances were remote. I'd tried before—in fact, I'd mated every year like clockwork since puberty.

How many had died?

I mentally calculated the years. Names rolled through my mind—the names of those who had died. I couldn't recall the names of the surviving mothers and their bastard babies. I cared nothing for them, for what purpose did they serve?

Far out at sea, past the horizon, orange tendrils threaded the surface of the water, giving it a polished glow. Like the surface of a fine table, one made by my far-removed underling, Amos Beiler. His loss had struck me hard, but it was to be. It was the way of the Great Old Ones.

Finally, Mapleton waded into the dark water and splashed over to Amelia Scarcliffe. She leapt up, quivering, and it seemed to me that all of the orange death of the sun had collected as pinpricks in her eyes. If I'd believed in demons, I would have thought her to be one. Yet I knew better.

There were no demons. Human theology was nonsense. Neither gods nor demons mattered. No, no, the only ones that mattered in the universe were beings from beyond, those who cared not for trivialities. There was no reason to pray to them. They cared only to be unshackled, released from their confines, returned to their earthly domain.

Where they existed, I did not know.

I *felt* them, and that was enough.

Mapleton's back to me, he placed his hands on Amelia's shoulders, spoke softly to her. He was a hulk of a man, born from generations of lords and conquerors, masters of this region. While I rarely ate, and possessed an ascetic's body, he towered above most men, and had the arms and legs of the mightiest warriors. His shaggy hair appeared cut by a butcher's knife. Mine was shaved clean off. His lineage was strong and noble and English. Mine sprang from the loins of laborers, those devoted to the cause. His home was massive, stone, ancient, moated. Mine was the corner of a rat's nest. Yet still, I ruled over Richard Mapleton, and still, I would have his desired mate.

I bristled with excitement. He and his henchman, this giant called Koos, would do my bidding.

Mapleton led the woman over the rubble of rocks to where I dominated all creatures from the slab of open waters. Koos opened the flaps of Dagon's instrument sack. The giant was even taller and more muscular than his master. His long jaw obscured his neck and hung over the top of his leather tunic, and his flat cheeks, high forehead, and lumbering gait gave him an air of a monster. Amelia shrank away from Koos, who gaped at her, eyes fixed on her wet white dress.

"Bring her to me," I commanded, and with both arms Koos lifted her, walked over, and placed her on my black slab.

"I-I am to have Richard?" Amelia said, propping herself on her elbows and glancing from me to Mapleton and back again. "L-Lord Mapleton?" The feeble orange dimmed to cinnamon on the black water, and also dimmed in her eyes.

"Step back," I told Mapleton and Koos, but when Amelia cried out and started to bolt, I ordered the two men to hold her down.

The surf pounded the rocks. Beyond the rubble, my minions slid and scrabbled down the trails ground into the cliffs. Overhead, the moon burst forth and oozed life. The stars sang. All was in harmony. The time was right, the time was now, that I would mate.

In the dark, Amelia was snuff-colored.

Mapleton grasped my arm and whispered harshly in my ear.

"Master, must you take this one?" he said.

"Take your hands off me," I barked.

Instantly, he withdrew. A trill of power swept through me.

"She is the most potent," I told him, "and I will have her."

A pause, then… "Yes, master," he said.

She squirmed on the slab. My men held her firmly. She whimpered, even begged. I saw that her toes were slightly webbed, and a tremor ran through me.

"I'm disappointed in you, my dear," I said. "Are you not ready to embrace Dagon? Are you not ready to carry his child? It is the ultimate test of our order. It is the third oath of the order, to spawn a child with a Deep One."

"But you… you are…"

“What?” I cried. “What am I, Amelia Scarcliffe? I’ll tell you what I am! I am the supreme almighty of the Order of Dagon and of the slab of open waters at Half Moon Bay! I am the one who will bring Him forth. I am the one descended from Captain Obed Marsh, who started this Order in 1838 after learning of the Great Ones in the South Seas. Dagon promises us gold, and he gives us gold. The Deep Ones require human sacrifice, and we give them human sacrifice. But now—” I gestured at Dagon’s instrument sack “—it is time for *you* to sacrifice your ultimate gift for Dagon. He demands that you mate with me, and mate with me you will!”

While Mapleton held both of Amelia’s wrists in one hand, Koos removed Dagon’s mating instruments from the sack and placed them by her feet. Then each man held a wrist and a knee, pinning her firmly in place on the rock. I signaled at two other men, Holmwood and Aakster, to help them, and they eagerly took their places at her side.

“Get those greedy looks off your faces. This is Dagon’s time, not yours,” I said, and they lowered their eyes.

“Shall we use the Schimmelbusch mask?” Mapleton asked.

“Anesthesia? No. She must be awake and in the service of Dagon.”

“No! Not this way! No!” my mate screamed, and I would have no more screaming from her—*no more!* I ordered Koos to gag her.

I needed to breed. Someone had to take over from me when my time was spent. It couldn’t be Fitzgerald, for he was too weak. Rather than living by the sea, he chose the land. He feared the Old Ones, the Deep Ones, Dagon, and Cthulhu. I knew he did. I knew it. He feared what I embraced. He was too full of himself, too public. Arrogant, attracting attention, toying with authorities.

He had broken the first two oaths, secrecy and loyalty. He loved human women. He would never fulfill the third and final oath, to sire a child by a Deep One.

I unbuttoned my black robe, and the wind swept in from the sea and whisked it to the cliffs. The crowd gasped and drew closer.

“Me.” I heard the females begging. “Take me next.” It made me stronger. All the men wished they were me. I knew their excitement to watch me mate. I would have felt the same, had I been one of them.

But I wasn’t one of them, was I?

Oh, no.

I was stronger, more potent, in command. I would herald the dawn of Dagon's dominion over earth. I would devote my life to Dagon, and when I died, his name would be the last word on my lips. I was his. Entirely.

This was not sex.

This was fate.

We mattered not. We were not here when Dagon and the Others ruled. We were finite.

They were infinite.

We were mortal.

They were *forever*.

I sank to my knees.

Only Innsmouth itself—far away from this place, with its Devil Reef—could compare with Half Moon Bay.

Home to the Deep Ones.

Dagon.

I began to lift her white robe, but I couldn't wait to breed—*I couldn't wait!*—so I ripped the flimsy cloth from her body.

"Wider!" I ordered, and the men wrenched her legs farther apart. She was no longer squirming. She must have known, deep within her soul, that this was her fate. She must have known by her webbed feet and her flapped neck. All would be well. She would not die. She would live and sire Dagon's offspring. My heirs.

"For Dagon!" I cried.

Around me, people shrieked in ecstasy, and swooned and fell to the rocks, and others coupled as if they, too, might produce offspring of the Deep Ones.

I plunged. Her body jerked back, rigid, and I plunged again. She was as wet as fish slime.

27

PETER SMYTHE-BARTON

West Kennet Long Barrow, Avebury

I knew where we was goin’ when they dragged me across the field. Way yonder on the ’ill, stones jutted, markin’ the entranceway to ol’ Kennet Long Barrow. I ’eard it said that it be at the barrow the dead breathed. I ’eard it said that it be at the barrow the dead talked.

For five thousand years, this barrow were ’ere, and for five thousand years, Druids and the like buried their dead in such caves. It were a spiritual place o’ energies and crossin’s from the netherworlds to ours. That’s what I’d ’eard, anyways.

These two no-names ’ad jumped me when I come out o’ the doctor’s surgery with me arm splint. I couldn’t fight ’em off, not with me bum arm. It were night, and nobody walked upon the green. Nobody was ne’er ’ere, ne’erways. So I let ’em drag me, knowin’ they was goin’ to get me up ’ere no matter, and as I figured, it’d wear ’em out if I didn’t walk on me own accord.

They was two brutes, they was, and I didn’t know ’em. They must come from London or maybe the coast, those far-off places o’ Fitzgerald’s. Both smelled bad, even worse than me. Both ’ad breath that stank. Filthy lads, they was. More than me, for even I ’ad me standards.

I knew what they wanted, too. I didn’t live nowheres now, not since I left the stable, so they couldn’t o’ trashed me ’ome. They would try to force me to tell ’em what they wanted to know. Fitzgerald wanted Wiltshram’s gold back.

Ne’er, I thought. I’d die without impartin’ that knowledge. There was nothin’ they could do to me to make me tell.

They lugged me up the slope, scrubby fields all around us, and when we got to the short stone corridor leadin’ to the barrow’s entranceway, they shoved me against the ’ard rock. I saw the sun o’er the stones that stretched into the sky. Before me were darkness: the unknown cave of the barrow, where the dead ’ad dreamed for thousands o’ years.

The man in charge, the one with the ’eavy mustache and giant black eyes, demanded to know where I’d ’id the gold.

“I ain’t sayin’. It’s mine.”

“And what makes you think I won’t get this out o’ you, you bugger, one way or another?” came the retort. “We ’ave our means, you know.”

Their *means*. Beatin’s. Knives. Fire.

On second thought, maybe I should ’ave told ’em about the gold. They was gonna kill me anyhows, and maybe it’d go down easier if they ’ad gold on their brains. They’d want to run off and get the gold, wouldn’t they?

The other man, squat and mean-lookin’, like ’e’d never laughed in ’is life except at another’s sufferin’, slammed me against the rock. Pain sliced down me back and into me legs. I’d swear me bones crunched, and I went a bit dizzy. The sun swirled o’er the standin’ stones, orange whippin’ into yellow into red. I blinked ’ard, tryin’ to keep me balance. ’e shifted a rucksack on ’is back and rolled ’is thick shoulders.

“Lookit,” the mean one said, “you got two choices. Tell us now, and we’ll make it quick. Tell us later, and we’ll make you die a thousand times over, know what I mean, you bugger?”

Yea, I should ’ave told ’em about the gold, then and there.

Now I ne’er believed much in God and all that. I mean, if I’d believed in all that supernatural God and devil rot, I’d ne’er stolen that gold or killed Wiltshram as I did, right? Yea, right. But a ’eat came o’er me by the barrow. I started prayin’ to some God I never knew. I prayed, “*Oh thee thou*… God in ’eavens out there somewheres, don’t let ’em do this to me, not yet. I ain’t much, I know, but I got some livin’ yet to do.” It wasn’t much o’ a prayer, but like I said, I didn’t ’ave much practice.

The fellow with the ’eavy mustache grabbed me and ’auled me into the barrow. Once inside, ’e pushed me through the narrow cave—down a black corridor o’ stone—down, down the corridor ’til we came to a small room. It be black ’ere, only a few piercin’ rays o’ sun crackin’ through the giant stone blocks. The mean fellow forced me to me knees.

“We’re beneath the earth now, Runty Pete. The barrow ain’t even on the surface. We’re in the other realm. This is your final restin’ place, it is.” ’e sounded pleased. I suspected ’e was lookin’ forward to ’urtin’ me.

I were scared, sure, but it didn’t matter none to me. After all, life were mean, and I always knew I’d die a rough death. For a day or two, I thought I’d be a rich man, afloat in wonders, surrounded by golden goddesses, that

sort o’ thing. But compared to the rest o’ my life, what’s a day or two o’ fantasy? I’d been born in the Wiltshram stable on molderin’ ’ay. Me mum died in that ’ay—I’d ne’er known ’er. I’d grown up a little thief and beggar, and a stable grunt. I’d ’ad me share o’ beatin’s, knifin’s, and whatever else the man dished out to those like meself.

“Runty Pete,” the one with the mustache said, “you ain’t goin’ to die easy ’ere no ways. You stold gold from a lord, and you killed ’im. Professor Fitzgerald and Lord Ashberton sent us to wreak justice upon you. Pontose laid this on you. Says ’e spotted you when ’e went for ale. They want that gold back, so you better talk before I get real mad and *make* you talk in ways you don’t like.”

’e pulled out a long curved blade, and his partner followed suit, except ’is blade was more like a ’atchet used to whack at the ’ay.

I started sweatin’, and the sweat instantly chilled me, for it were cold down ’ere under the ground in these caves. Me teeth chattered lightly. Me good arm trembled, and with me free ’and, I clutched at the cold, dry stone beneath me. In the dim red light, a few o’ the stones glistened. One, in particular, looked wet, slick like it were blood-drenched.

Me arm ’urt somethin’ terrible.

To me left, two huge boulders crushed what looked like a ’ead between ’em. I remembered the ooze o’ Wiltshram’s brain between me fingers. I remembered the bleedin’ mess ’is fat ’ead ’ad made when I chopped it up. I wondered if me own ’ead would fare better, or maybe if they’d stick me skull between some rocks ’ere in the barrow.

The mean-looking fellow dumped the contents o’ his rucksack on the stone floor o’ the cave. Out clattered steel that made the long curved blades look ’omey. ’e ’eld up a metal rod with a serrated ’ook at one end.

“This ’ere be to use on your ’ead,” ’e said.

I stared at ’im evenly. I was tougher than ’e thought, and wouldn’t give ’im any satisfaction. I didn’t so much as flinch. After all, ’ow long would it take to thwack me ’ead off with that ’ook? Two, three swipes? So that was what? Maybe ten seconds o’ excruciating pain, tops. I could ’andle it.

When ’e waved the other rod in front o’ me, I weren’t so sure. It were a ’ollow tube, and long, and inside that tube were a long steel prong with a forked end. ’e laughed loudly, and ’is laughs echoed through the cave and down the stone corridors, eerily amplified ’til I ’eard ’em ringin’ in me ears even after they died.

“They call this baby a sigmoidal somethin’ or other,” ’e said. “I forget, but it don’t matter—you’ll know ’ow it works, soon enough.”

The fellow with the mustache, the one in charge, spoke up.

“Charlie, let’s start with that.” ’e moved closer to me, crouched, and ’is breath was ripe on me face. “Get on the ground, Runty, and stick your bum up.”

No way. At this, me body started shakin’ violently. I could ’andle a sawed-off ’ead, but no way I could ’andle ’em jabbin’ that prong thing up me arse. I struggled, but it be pointless, o’ course. Me broken arm made sure o’ that.

They pressed me to the stone, and a boot pushed down on me back to keep me rigid in place. I kicked and squirmed, but it didn’t matter. I thought me ’ead would explode from the terror, I did. I gritted me teeth, squeezed shut me eyes. Started countin’.

Uh 1, uh 2, uh 3, uh…

They stripped me breeches to me ankles.

They jammed that thing down ’ard into me, way down ’ard ’til I shrieked, and even behind me closed eyelids, I saw colors screamin’ and blazin’ e’erywheres. And then came that prong with the fork on its end. I don’t think I did Wiltshram this painful, I don’t. And then in came somethin’ else, some steel thing, and I ’eard a clank-clash-clank, and then a whirr like a ’andle bein’ turned; and this thing, it opened deep inside me body and stabbed me e’erywhere, blade upon blade slicin’ deep.

I screamed like I ne’er screamed.

The boot pressed me down ’arder to the stone.

“Tell us where you ’id that gold, weasel, and we’ll let up on you. *Tell us!*”

Like I say, I knew I were goin’ to die, and it were goin’ to be a ’ard death. What good were the gold to me? I was no Runty Pete, nosirree. I was Peter Smythe-Barton, a man o’ courage and strength and grit. I would die a mean man’s death. No more screamin’ from me. No more.

I flapped me good arm against the stone, and they removed the steel prong and then the tube.

Me body went slack.

The boot lifted, but remained on me back, all gentle-like.

“I tell you where the gold be,” I said ’oarsely, “and you kill me swiftly, yea?”

“We be gentlemen,” the mustached one said.

“You bury me ’ere, me body, all o’ it in one piece?” I asked.

“O’ course. That goes without sayin’. We be men o’ ’onor.”

And so, I told ’em.

“The gold’s buried some twelve ’undred paces west then two ’undred paces north then one ’undred paces east from Fitzgerald’s *Norma* theater, out in the woods.”

That was all they needed. They didn’t ’old onto me ’til they checked me story. They figured I told ’em the truth, and I did. Because all three o’us knew that, should I be lyin’, I would suffer. I didn’t want some whirrin’ blade thing up me bum, slicin’ and dicin’ me innards to death.

“Make it clean,” I said, nice and steely and manlike.

But they didn’t.

They took to me ’ead with the serrated ’ook blade. Laughter, growlin’, they sawed me neck—once, twice, thrice…six times that ’ook ’ad me. I was nothing but a sack o’ pain, so much pain that I could think o’ nothin’ else. But I didn’t cry out, and I didn’t whimper, not one jot.

Then with the blood, dizziness washed o’er me, and I thought o’ me first girl and ’ow I missed ’er. Then I thought o’ me mum, who was in the place o’ quiet death.

28
DR. JOHN WATSON

Whitechapel

A harsh whirring reminded me that we were near the tram machine, except this time I heard the clanking, wheezing, and grinding a block away as I passed the *MEAT* building window.

Holmes hurried ahead, swinging left on Thrawl Street, but I paused—and there he was, the boy whose father butchered animals. He stared at me through a window so dirty I could barely make out his features. I guessed that he was about eight years old. His face was brown, streaked with soot and blood, and his eyes were the same color.

Suddenly he backed away, his face disappearing into the blackness behind him. I waited a moment, then trudged onward, wondering who he was, his name.

I limped around the corner onto Thrawl Street. The closer I got to the Jacobs building, the greater the stench of phosphorus. I don't know what was worse, the phosphorus or the raw sewage gathering in the gutters. I felt saturated to the pore by foul odors.

Most likely, Mrs. Hudson would have to launder another suit of clothes for me. Just as likely, I would return to Mary wearing Holmes's clothes, perhaps his carefully tailored coat, which was much too long on me and much too narrow. Or worse, I might have to wear his white dressing gown. The thought made me chuckle.

Holmes stood before the door of the tram machine building, pressing in the numbers. He stepped back, and the metal door rattled up.

Upon our entry, the machine shrieked. Steel limbs clattered and banged against the walls and ceiling. Coiled tubes, like Amos Beiler's intestines, flopped and oozed black muck.

It must be a coincidence, I thought. After all, there was no way the machine *knew* we were there. As Holmes disappeared inside, into the shadows, I heard Willie Jacobs soothing the beast, then Inspector Lestrade greeting my friend.

"There, there," Jacobs cooed as if to Samuel, "these men won't 'urt you." I ducked into the building, while the monstrosity settled down to a hiss and a whine.

It had been a week since the attack on Mary and Samuel. I'd moved them to an associate's flat, and yesterday, the gas had been fixed. I'd finished

repairing and cleaning our home, so Mary had insisted upon returning.

“I don’t want to impose on the goodwill of people I barely know,” she’d said. “I want to be home, with everything Samuel needs close at hand.” She’d hesitated, then added, “Move me elsewhere, John, far away, and come with me.”

At this I had agreed—to find a safe place, far from London. I would move my family there, then come to them as soon as I was able to get away. Mary frowned, and I wondered if it was what she had intended, but she let it drop.

It had been a week since I checked Willie Jacobs into the hospital, paid for by Sherlock Holmes. His stay had been brief. Whatever had caused the pus in his eyes had been washed away. As to his other ailments, however, he was no better— still scabbed, blotched, and jabbing at the enlarged nostril. He complained about aching teeth and sensitive gums. His face appeared more sallow and bloated than before. On the positive side, Scotland Yard and the London police no longer thought it possible that he’d murdered his father.

“Even dimwits like Detective Bentley had to realize that Willie Jacobs wouldn’t gas himself,” Holmes told me, *“and then injure himself while risking his life to save your wife and child.”*

Lestrade’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “So you show up at last,” he said moodily. “And what do you make of this nightmare?”

“Dr. Watson and I were disheartened to learn that some of your men died in this very room, Inspector,” Holmes replied. “I suspect that hacking at this machine with axes, cleavers, and hammers will result in more of the same —the falling of steel pipes and pieces. As to their claim that it grew new limbs…” Holmes gazed doubtfully at the Inspector, who grimaced.

Something scampered past me, something the size of a dog standing upright, and I jumped involuntarily. From the corner of my eye, I saw him —the boy from the *MEAT* building. He dashed to my left, skirted the beast, and disappeared behind it.

“Who’s that?” Lestrade demanded from over by the phosphorus pit.

“’e is Timmy, Jr.,” Jacobs said. “Timmy Dorsey’s son.” Using a shovel, he dumped gray metal from a crate into the pit. As if on cue, the boy peeked out from behind the construction.

“Get out of here, lad!” Lestrade bellowed, but the boy didn’t respond. Bubbles shot up and burst in mid-air, emitting black gas and steam.

Coughing, I yanked my scarf over my nose and moved as far from the pit as possible.

“Get out of here!” Lestrade called again, with the same lack of results. Then he told me, “After being in this room for a few minutes, you’ll get used to the steam.”

My mind remained on Timmy Dorsey, Jr., the child of a criminal. Detective Bentley claimed that the police didn’t have enough evidence to put his father behind bars. Dorsey, Sr. was not only a butcher. He was a known murderer.

Before me stood Willie Jacobs, who had followed in the footsteps of his father, his grandfather, and generations before. Was Timmy, Jr. doomed to follow in *his* father’s footsteps, not only as a butcher but also as a *murderer*?

“We’ll clear the boy out when we depart,” Lestrade said. He finally emitted a large gasp, exhaling, and left the pit to pace near the door, probably to get “fresh” air, as if there was any to be had on the street.

“It’s dangerous for the lad back there.” Jacobs tossed aside his shovel and slithered under a clump of wires and metal bars. I heard him grunting, then something clanged and he grunted again. “You come ’ere. I won’t be ’urtin’ you, Timmy. I knew your daddy. ’e be me mate when we both was grubbin’ on the streets. I won’t ’urt you.”

“Interesting that Willie Jacobs was friends with a killer, don’t you think?” Lestrade commented.

“Come now,” I piped up. “Jacobs did *not* kill his father.”

“Yes, yes, we’ve been through all that, and I agree. We’re beginning to talk in circles.” The Inspector turned to my companion. “I still think Moriarty had something to do with the death of that girl. And now you tell me the attacker in Dr. Watson’s flat claimed that he was sent to threaten Mary and Samuel. That this… this *mastermind* has a name that begins with ‘M’?”

“Yes,” I said, though I knew I couldn’t be certain.

“Moriarty?” Lestrade suggested.

“It remains within the realm of possibility,” Holmes admitted. “Still, it may have been a ruse—he may have been coached to say such a thing.” He smiled and withdrew a cigarette from a case that he then returned to his coat pocket. Then looking at his surroundings—sparks flying, gears grinding, cables writhing, and pipes clattering—he put the cigarette away.

It never ceased to amaze me how he could remain so calm. Death, death, and more death.

Killers, killers, and more killers. Even *I* had taken the life of a man only last week, right there in my own home, right there with Mary and Samuel gassed and huddled on the front steps. I'd knifed the man, then called for a carriage to bring him to the hospital, but as is often the case in London, by the time they opened the cab door, the man was dead.

Murdered by *me*.

His blood was on *me*.

No different from the war, I told myself.

"Watson! Focus!" Holmes clapped me on the shoulder, and I jumped. Willie Jacobs slithered back beneath the clump of steel bars. Behind him came the young Timmy, Jr., dragged by his frayed jacket.

"No, me dad will beat me," the boy protested. "*No!*" He struggled to free himself.

"You can't stay 'ere, lad. It's dangerous 'ere."

"But 'ere is better than with me dad!" He looked at his captor with pleading eyes. "I can 'elp you! I can fix things!" At that, Willie Jacobs stopped cold. He turned and firmly shook the boy by both shoulders. I'd never seen this side of the man, vigorous and strong.

"Look at me 'ead, lad. I still am young, and yet look at me 'ead. *Look at it*, I say!" He dipped low, right in front of Timmy's face, and the poor boy had no choice but to stare at the brown splotches, the hairs randomly clumped like small patches of weeds. "Now look at me face," he instructed, lifting his head again. "Look 'ard at it." And when the boy again did as told, seeing Jacobs's enlarged nostril and the skin flaking off in brown-scab clumps, he recoiled in horror.

"No," he whimpered. "I ain't like that, no!"

"You'll be like that, lad, if you stay 'ere in this room with the beast. This is what it'll do to you. The beast will take your life."

Timmy broke free, staggered back a few steps, then streaked toward the door. None of us tried to stop him. He was better off on the sewage-clogged streets, better off with his abusive father. He was better off *anywhere but here*, inside this wretched building.

Evil is a relative thing. As the boy raced into the street and out of view, I must have had a very morose look on my face, because Holmes gently shook my arm.

“We can’t take care of everyone, not all at once, Doctor,” he said, and after a pause, added, “You’re not responsible for the world’s woes, and neither am I. We can only solve one problem at a time.”

“You’re killin’ that boy if you let ’im stay ’ere,” Jacobs said, shoulders sagging, head bowed again. He had returned to his usual state, that of meek desperation. “I can’t let nobody tend to the beast. Only me. It’s enough that I’m like this.”

I had to agree, yet something told me that we would be seeing more of the boy. He’d return, if only out of curiosity and the need for mischief. His fate was sealed, just as Jacobs’s fate had been sealed.

Holmes began to fidget. He was anxious to get on with his objective—shutting down the machine.

I was more anxious to learn why Lestrade’s men hadn’t saved my family from the attacker who tried to gas them, and pressed the Inspector on the subject. Lestrade usually stiff and formal, twitched when I did so. He explained that he’d called the guards away from my flat when the East End murder occurred.

“I needed all my men, Doctor, to subdue the mobs and look for the killer. I left one man at your door…” He saw the look on my face and his tone became conciliatory. “I swear to you, Doctor, that we will place multiple men, not only in front of your home, but in the rear,” he said fervently. “Nobody will attack your wife again, sir.”

As he did so, Holmes and Willie Jacobs were deep in conversation, discussing how best to subdue the beast. “It’s very strange,” my friend observed. “Your machine doesn’t appear to have accordion-like mechanisms that might enable the contraction and expansion of metal limbs.” He frowned deeply, confronted by the inexplicable.

“It’s not natural,” Jacobs agreed. “The limbs grew out o’ nowhere.” Still, he said, there might be a way to switch off the beast without resorting to a direct assault.

“The diagrams tol’ me father to feed phosphorus into the pits,” he said, his voice bubbling with hysteria. “The beast gives the power and gold, in return. It cannot survive without the food.”

“Yes, yes, but why *phosphorus*, Mr. Jacobs?”

“Professor Fitzgerald, ’e tol’ me father not to give the beast ordinary fuel, coal. Phosphorus, ’e said.”

“But nobody fuels a machine with phosphorus,” Holmes argued. “Why should this work?” The frown remained firmly in place.

“I tell you, I don’t know!”

“Nevertheless, he’s given us the answer, Holmes,” I said, interrupting them. “Stop providing phosphorus, and the machine will run down.” I turned away from Lestrade, who I found irritating, at best. “Eventually it will shut down.”

“The beast was without phosphorus while I were stayin’ at your ’ome, Dr. Watson,” Jacobs countered. “It was furious.”

“Angry, perhaps, but still it will stop running,” I countered.

“It kept runnin’ all that time,” Jacobs said.

“There’s something else?” Holmes said, peering intently. “Another element that the machine requires in order to survive?”

“Yes,” Willie said, “lead. But ’ow did you know?”

“Basic chemistry—the answer has been within reach the entire time.” Holmes raised his eyebrows at me, but I didn’t follow his reasoning, so he proceeded. “The phosphorus required a catalyst of some kind, and it must react with something else.

“Remember the numbers that somehow open the door,” he continued. “Remember those same numbers in the Beiler’s *Dagonite Auctoritatem*. It included 197, the atomic weight of gold, and 16, the atomic weight of oxygen. And finally, 207—the atomic weight of lead.”

“So withdrawing the phosphorus or the lead would result in the slow demise of the machine,” I offered. “If both were withheld, perhaps the machine would suddenly malfunction and… what?” A horrifying thought occurred to me. “Might it explode, and take with it the whole neighborhood? Could that happen?”

“If the matter were as simple as denying it fuel, then we could be done with it,” Holmes said. “It attacks anyone who tries to disassemble it. It attacks intruders who it thinks might damage it.” I stared at him, hardly believing what I heard him saying. It was so…

Jacobs let out a pitiable cry. His right hand flew to his nose, where he jabbed both nostrils with his knuckles— rapidly, again and again…

“This ain’t just a machine!” he screamed. “It don’t operate like a normal machine. It’s of another realm, I tell you! It’s controlled by other things, I tell you!” He pointed frantically. “I see the snakes up there, I see ’em, and

even the beast don’t know I see ’em. The beast, it will kill again. If we deny it food, it will split the ’eavens and rain death!”

It was Holmes’s turn to stare.

“You’re talking nonsense,” he scoffed. “Utter nonsense. This is just a machine. There are no snakes, not here, not underfoot, not in the pit, not crawling up the walls. Believe the evidence of your own eyes, Mr. Jacobs. Pull yourself together. Nothing is going to split the heavens or rain death upon London. Nothing.”

“You refuse to believe!” Willie shrieked, jabbing wildly. “You the one is mad, then!”

“Calm down,” I said, reaching for him. I was thankful he could remain in his own home from now on, rather than in mine. Far from Mary and Samuel. I would not repeat that hospitality.

He pulled away and grabbed a shovel. I recoiled, fearing that he was going to lash out with it, but he stepped away from us, limbs jerking involuntarily.

“Look!” Willie cried, slamming the shovel into one of the crates. “I give it phosphorus, and I give it lead! Watch, you fools!” Before we could react, he dumped a load of dull white material into the pit. In the shadows, it appeared to glow dimly with a tinge of green. Then he dug into a second crate, extracting shovelfuls of metallic gray stones.

They followed the phosphorus into the pit.

As if on cue, whatever was in the pit sloshed, followed by a deep sucking noise that filled the room. Tremors ran through the beast. The steel pipes, hoses, cables, bars, and sheets trembled and glowed from within—an eerie white, ghostlike. The construction rumbled, a low growling. More sucking came from beneath our feet, from beneath the very building.

Abruptly, a cable dropped from near the ceiling. It thrashed low, hitting Willie Jacobs’s shoulders. He cried out in pain, and cringed.

“It wants more.”

Sherlock Holmes, Lestrade, and I moved quickly toward the door, which still stood open. The ruined man followed us.

“Watch,” Jacobs muttered. “Watch…”

As he neared us, the cable swung up, then lashed out again, slamming against his upper back. He fell, full front, to the floor, screaming upon impact. The cable swung again, ready to lash out against the servant of the beast.

Oh dear God, I thought.

Holmes and I wrenched the man to his feet, and the three of us dashed to the right as the cable slammed down again, this time hitting cement and sending dust and filth up in a cloud. Lestrade edged to the door.

Jacobs pulled away from our grip and hobbled back to the pit, grabbing another shovel that stuck out of one of the "food" crates. The cable coiled—like a snake, it coiled!—up toward the ceiling. It tucked itself on top of the beast and glowed an eerie greenish-white, from the phosphorus.

"It wants me, only me," Jacobs said. "No intruders. You must go, all of you go."

"You see, I'm not mad at all," Lestrade exclaimed. "Even you, the great Sherlock Holmes, must admit that this machine kills, that there is no shutting it down."

"No," my friend said. "If the machine kills, it's because somehow humans enable it to kill—make it do so. There must be a way to shut it down, and we will discover it."

Jacobs dumped more fuel into the pit.

The beast quivered and groaned with delight.

"Me, only me," Jacobs moaned. "You must leave." Holmes strode past me. I grabbed at him, but he shoved me off.

"Deny it the food, Mr. Jacobs!"

"No, Mr. 'olmes." Another shovelful for the construct. "It's too dangerous. Me life is o'er, anyway. You must go, or the beast will kill you—and more besides."

Holmes cursed and wrenched Jacobs away from the crates. He threw the shovel to the floor and dragged the wretch over to Lestrade.

"No!" Jacobs cried. "The beast will kill."

"Sir, get a grip on yourself!" Holmes said. "Lestrade, remove Jacobs from the building." Jacobs flailed against the Inspector, but Lestrade was much stronger, and hauled him out through the door.

"That man is mad!" Holmes cried.

But I wasn't so sure.

From its perch, the cable whipped down. It was so quick, I couldn't believe I was seeing it. The tentacle slammed down, missing Holmes by an inch or two. It hit the cement with such impact that the dust rose higher than our heads. It swung up, then thrashed at Holmes again. He jumped from its path.

Thrash.

Jump.

Thrash.

From outside, Willie Jacobs was shrieking, “No! It will kill you, Mr. ’olmes! The snakes will come, the ’eavens will open, the skies will rain death on us all!”

29

MARCEAU POISSON

Blois, France

I sipped Bordeaux by the bay window, which supplied a gallery-quality view of the striated rock—wavy and darker gray on the right, splattered with lighter dots on the left, the sum of the parts yielding slippage into the mind-changing effects of modern art. What I had in my one-room hut was more sophisticated than George Seurat's Conté crayon drawing of his mother.

I blew out the candle on my side table, and the otherwise windowless room darkened. My private art, the rock, mutated before my eyes into black jots infused with ghostly white, forming the vision of an older woman with her embroidery.

We sat together, the Woman and I, enjoying an intimate silence. We didn't require words. She knew that I dreamed of her, night after night in my black room, with her bowed face glowing, her nimble fingers aching to drop the embroidery and caress me. Her gray hair held mysteries: what had she done in the course of the decades, who and what had she desired, and why did she dwell here in the rock abutting my tunnels?

I knew that the Woman viewed me just as I viewed her, for I, too, was a mystery, a man composed of black skin and black hair, but glowing with an inner light. She probably wondered what I had done for the past forty years, who and what I had desired, and why I dwelled in a one-room hut abutting my tunnels.

The Woman and I had much in common.

My followers made too much noise, as usual, crunching over rocks to gain access to the tunnels. But they came, and for that, I was pleased. They would prepare the Sanctuary for me, and then, I would join them, leading them to ecstasy and the openness required by the Great Old Ones, and most specifically, by our Lord and Master, *Oh Great Dagon*.

They muttered amongst themselves. Some slipped, I knew, on the odd rock of deadly dimensions. The angles were sharp and changed often, and

in the dark tunnels, those without inner knowledge could easily slip, fall, and die. I knew every crevasse in the rock, all the angles, all the points, tips, spears, but even I stepped carefully when entering the Master's Sanctuary.

I had completed the construction of the tunnel entrance, the floors, the entire Sanctuary. Thanks be to my father and grandfather, to my great-grandfather and his father, for they had interpreted the ancient drawings and started the project that I finally completed.

I had hidden the *Dagonite Auctoritatem* deep within the tunnel system, where nobody could find it. Only I knew where it was. The labyrinth twisted and kinked, went up and down, curled in many directions, with the tunnels crisscrossing everywhere. I kept the wine in rooms off the tunnels, and in one of those rooms—and there were hundreds—I kept the *Dagonite Auctoritatem* behind a stone block that I had carefully carved into the wall. When I tapped my corkscrew against the block in a certain way, it loosened, and I could easily remove it from the surrounding rock.

Everything in the tunnels came from the ancient drawings and my incantations from the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*. Oh, how I loved the chants, how my voice bounced down the tunnels, echoing over and over, chiming, ringing on the rock.

Only a dweller within the tunnels, only one who stores his wine within the rocks, could have interpreted the ancient drawings that my ancestors found in the rudimentary caves of Blois. Wedged in rock, scrawled in blood on yellowed animal hide, the drawings required great skill with both masonry and sculpture. They required a voice skilled with incantations, for each note bounced off the strange dimensions of the rock ceilings, walls, and floors in particular patterns. The sum of the patterns brought life to the tunnels—*yes, life!*

Tonight the patterns would bring forth the Woman, and she would finally come to me, yes, she would come out of the rock and scream the incantations *with* me. We would breed, and I would fulfill the third obligation of the Order of Dagon. I would finally breed with an Old One, and our spawn would do the bidding of the Great Dagon.

I was a musician. I was a singer and philosopher. I was a great artist. Nobody carved rock better than I did.

I was more skilled than George Seurat with his Conté crayons.

I was more skilled than Michelangelo when he'd crafted the marble *David*. Yes, that had been mere craftsmanship. My work was pure art, my

sculpting driven by a force much greater than any known by mortals. Although I stood five feet tall and weighed a hundred pounds, I towered over all other men. I had the strength, the height, the physical beauty of Michelangelo's *David*.

On the other side of the Woman, wood scraped against stone, and I knew that my followers sat upon the crates, waiting for me.

I gulped the last of my Bordeaux, caressed the Woman— her face, her hands, her black-clad breasts. She flicked a smile at me. It was a brief twitch on her lips, much as the Mona Lisa smiles, and then it was gone. But I saw it, and I smiled back.

"Soon, my love. Soon, we will be together, joined as One, joined in the Deep as desired by Lord Dagon. Soon, the world will know of your Power. Soon, we will mate."

My hands went to my face, where the dry skin flaked, giving my flesh the roughness of fish scales. Then to my scalp, where my unwashed black hair clumped in greasy mounds. I sculpted the hair now into knobs resembling coral of the Deep Sea. Black coral knobs that would wave in the water as soon as Lord Dagon took me in.

Although I worshiped Him in dark tunnels, He would bring me to the Deep Sea. I had no doubt. I'd been to Saint-Malo on the coast, a long trip but well worth the journey. I'd seen where my ancestors had come from, there by the sea, the Deep, a place of piracy and death. I'd seen the tomb of François-René de Chateaubriand, son of the sea captain who dealt in human flesh: the flesh of slaves. Damn him for that, for dragging us across the sea. But during that journey my ancestors merged with the Deep and became acolytes of Dagon. They brought their knowledge with them to Saint-Malo, and from there, fled servitude and death, hiding here in the vast tunnel system of Blois. I was born in these tunnels, as was my father and his father before him.

But our roots were in the Deep, and as dust returns to dust, Marceau Poisson would return to the sea.

I moved slowly, my bowed legs entrapped by stiff, filthy trousers, my arms, torso, and gill buds encased in a black wool coat I'd found in the forest. The coat dragged on the floor, much too long for my short body. I didn't care. Clothing was irrelevant. Food was irrelevant. Everything was irrelevant.

Only Lord Dagon held meaning, for when he returned to claim the forests and the tunnels and the seas, souls would flush empty, human life would run dry, and finally, the world would know that, in the vastness, humans did not matter.

Life held no meaning beyond petty desires.

Death was simply the boundary between petty desires and nothingness.

So who cared?

What mattered was a return to the Old Ways. With the Woman, my line would continue past human pettiness.

Oh, please let it be, Lord Dagon!

My sandals, made of polished bark and vines, cleaved to the rock, as my webbed fingers inched across the rock wall. Only a half-dozen steps later, I felt the door knob and whisked back the door. I caressed the Crest of Dagon, a nonagon of marble I'd carved with three octopuses and adorned with symbols from the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*.

My fingers flicked over my engraved family name and the tentacles that embraced it at the bottom of the crest. I sucked in a breath, drew up my shoulders, and stepped from my room into the Sanctuary.

Bright light.

My eyes ached, and I had to shut and then re-open them very slowly as they adjusted to the glow of the wall torches.

My followers squatted on crates set in a semi-circle around the stone slab. Already, they'd opened my Bordeaux, filled their cups, and were half-drunk. All male, not a single female amongst them. A scurvy lot, some joined the Order to feel as if they belonged with Others, some joined because they wanted blood, some because they liked my bar, and others for the right reason, because they *believed*.

I gestured at the filled crates stacked along the cave walls.

"Take what you need, what you desire," I said.

Mathieu and Pierre grabbed a few bottles each, opened them with the corkscrews I kept in the crates, and poured more wine into their glasses. I wanted the men drunk tonight. I didn't want anyone losing their nerve, backing out, running off to tell the idiot villagers what we were doing in the Sanctuary.

Pierre was actually married, but didn't care a whit about his wife and children. I think he came to the Order to escape. Mathieu, Charles, Nicolas, Thibault, Denis, Guillaume, Louis—of them all, perhaps Denis was the

only one without female companionship. The others never seemed to have trouble attracting females at the village bars. Things were different on the Outside. Here, within the fold, *Inside*, the Woman insisted that she be the only One.

I fell to my knees on the stone slab. With my bowed legs, it was a difficult position for me, and my muscles ached. But no matter. I reached for the sacred scalpel, and with trembling hands, scratched the final symbols onto the surface.

The walls of the Sanctuary spasmed.

The ceiling *groaned*.

I stretched my arms toward my followers. They couldn't take their eyes off the ceiling. Men clutched at each other, terrified, all of them—*all except me*.

"*Q'ulsi pertaggen fh'thagn!*" I cried.

Then I lifted my eyes.

Tendrils sprouted from the ceiling. As if the rock had melted, hundreds of tendrils dripped down, and now they fluttered as if in a gentle sea. I was mesmerized. The fluttering was hypnotic. But then, turbulence came and it grew, just as it did beneath the Deep Sea when the currents are strong. I heard the crashing of waves high above the ceiling somewhere. I felt the fear of the sea creatures, the schools of fish, the octopuses, the walruses.

The tendrils whipped, their filaments tangled in knots, and in the very center of them, the ceiling bulged, dipping lower… and now lower. The bulge pulsed like a heart beat, and with each pulse, my own heart contracted and spasmed. My chest hurt, my shoulders.

The bulge expanded in two directions, giving the throbbing rock the shape of an hourglass.

I saw each particle of rock as it shifted. Gray within gray, black piercing white, and white glowing within black.

The shifting of rock, the shifting of time.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of tendrils lashed, and as they hit flesh, my nerves screamed. It was the sweep of jellyfish stingers, of Portuguese men-of-war.

Great Dagon, sting me, inject me with your blood, make me one with You. Take me to the sea and let me spawn a thousand eggs.

The tunnels quivered. The cave walls trembled. The wine bottles clinked in their crates. Wine sloshed in the glasses, wine stained the men's hands

like blood, wine dribbled down their throats, searing their bellies with the sting of Dagon.

Slash went a jellyfish tendril—*liquid burning pain*. I cringed but did not cry out. *Slash* went another tendril, then another, and another. Still, I did not lower myself and cry, for this was my destiny, my fate, and I fully accepted it in whatever form it took.

And yet…

Dagon, why do you hurt me? Is this how you will kill me? Please let me worship you to the fullest. Give me the Woman first.

I summoned my strength.

"*Q'ulsi pertaggen fh'thagn*." This time, I sputtered the words.

The wall torches flared and crackled. The floor heaved, then lurched upward… up, up, until it was skewed, one edge near the ceiling, the other dipping yards beneath the surface. My skin burned. It fused into the stone slab beneath me. I smelled frying meat. *It was my skin and muscles and fat!*

Where was the Woman?

My knees could no longer hold me, and I toppled over, rolled to my back. From this vantage point, I could see that I no longer *had* knees. Flames whipped up my leg stumps to my thighs.

I had to have the Woman. Now, before it was too late.

"*Q'ulsi fh'thagn perhagen n'creechilckcklon!*" I hissed through melting lips, my lungs heavy with heat.

Men tumbled with crates down the skewed floor from the Sanctuary into the tunnels. The wine crates slid after them and crashed into rock walls, smashing all the bottles. Blood-wine gushed over rock and screaming flesh. I saw white teeth, black blood spurting, white eyes bursting to black, torches shooting white fire up black walls.

Over me, the tendrils coiled into spikes and descended. At their tips, melted rock dripped and burned into my scalp.

"*Q'ulsi cantatro'f'b'f'w'l'llllccckkkkk*."

These were my last words.

The Sanctuary pulsed. Its heart beat within stone.

And there she was…

The Woman.

She came from the bulge. She came from within the tendrils. She came from the Deep Sea.

The sly smile of Mona Lisa. The webbed fingers holding the embroidery. The gills fully formed. The scaled flesh of her face iridescent and silver. Eyes protruding, and now popping like corks from the bottles, the sockets a mush of black Bordeaux. Her scent was heady, like Saint-Malo after the men dump their catch.

The fleshy tube behind my anus tingled with excitement.

Release your eggs.

Spawn, spawn! Let us spawn!

The flames roared over my thighs and into my crotch.

My stomach exploded. The ceiling fell, and with it came the Woman.

“The dimensions!” she cried. “You got the dimensions wrong!”

Patterns flicked in my mind.

Had I not been precise enough? Was I not Michelangelo?

I grappled for the answer, but nothing came.

The flames nicked my hair, and then all went black.

PART THREE

CASTA DIVA

30

DR. JOHN WATSON

Blois, France

It was a long journey, more than four hundred miles, and Holmes and I were exhausted by the time we reached our destination. First, we took the train from London to Dover, then we crossed by boat to Calais, and from there, went by horse and carriage to Blois.

Mary had begged me not to leave, but in the end, it was she who provided the reasoning behind Holmes's insistence that we travel so far.

*

"Don't go, John," Mary protested. "You need to stay home with me and Samuel. Please don't go—not now. We were almost killed!" She was furious with me for even considering a trip to France. She didn't want me to see Sherlock Holmes again, much less work with him.

In his way, Holmes had tried to comfort her.

"You'll be safe, I promise," he'd said with great sincerity, for I knew he wouldn't risk their lives. Not again, not after what had happened with the gas, the now-dead assailant. "Inspector Lestrade has many men posted around your home. Nothing will happen, I assure you."

"Can't you go without my husband?"

"I could, yes, but I fear that people may be at risk in France. Lestrade tells us that the French police have uncovered another set of strange drawings, these for an elaborate tunnel system. More horrible, there's been an explosion in the tunnels. Men died there, and I need your husband to help with the autopsies, the medical examination of any remains we find."

"More dead bodies," she murmured. "More killing. No. Please, Mr. Holmes, get another doctor to go with you."

At that point, I intervened. This was my home, my wife, my family, and I couldn't let another man argue with Mary about a decision that I had to make.

"You will be safe, Mary, with so many police here at all times," I had said. "Despite the fact that they are short of staff, they've put forth every

effort to protect you and Samuel. I feel certain that you *will* be safe. I wouldn't risk anything less, I swear to you."

"John," she'd replied, staring levelly at me with no warmth in her eyes, "*don't go*. You promised that we would move. You *promised*."

She'd never looked at me with such coldness, and it frightened me.

"Would you like to stay with Lestrade himself, perhaps?" I suggested. "Or again with friends?"

"No."

"Mary, I can't find a place for us this quickly," I said. "Perhaps you could stay in Holmes's rooms, until I find a more permanent arrangement?"

Holmes's eyebrows shot up.

"No," Mary said. "I've seen the strange drawings, and the odd symbols from that book of yours, that *Dagonite Auctoritatem*. The hideous book that burned your fingers, John! It's nothing I have seen before in all my reading, and yet somehow it is connected to murder, John. Just… *stop*. *Stay home*."

"The truth still eludes us," Holmes had countered, "and I need your husband's insights. He knows my methods. He has a keen intellect. He's a scientist, and I need him with me. I need his help."

I looked from Mary to Holmes and then back to Mary. Always caught between them.

"I've told you everything," I said, hoping to pry her mind from a sore subject to one that might interest her. "The geometry, the door numbers—which we also found in the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*. What do you make of it all?"

Her brow wrinkled. "You mean the astronomical and chemical numbers? I believe that I once read that light travels from the sun to the earth in 493 seconds… or thereabouts. *Astronomy*, hmmm. Perhaps your 500 refers to a more accurate measurement for the time it takes for light to travel to the earth. In that vein, perhaps 437 refers to the time it takes light to move from the nearest stars to earth. All I recall is that the time is greater than three years, so this is a guess."

Pausing, she concentrated, then continued.

"Atomic weights. Lead. Gold. Phosphorus. Oxygen—"

"*But that's it! Of course!*" Holmes leapt from his chair and started pacing by the fireplace. "And now we *must* go!

We're so much closer to the truth now! I can *feel* it!"

Mary had blinked rapidly.

“Yes,” she’d said, much to my surprise, “I see now. I *see*.”

*

Because my wife had seen the science before I did, I was now traversing the ancient cobblestones of central France, where Joan of Arc had once established her headquarters in the relief of Orléans.

In the end, Mary had relented, shaking her head and dismissing me with a wave of her hand. She understood how the science could drive me forward, that quest to uncover truth. She knew that this drive was at the core of who I was and that, without it, I would be empty and miserable. And so, assured by Lestrade that my family would be safe until my return, Holmes and I had set off.

Holmes had instructed the driver to take us to the countryside, to the tunnels described by Lestrade. Reins slapped and the horses clattered forward.

“I don’t believe in alchemical reactions,” he said. “I don’t believe that lead turns into gold, but what I do know is that whatever has occurred in that tram machine building involves chemical reactions related to phosphorus, lead, gold, and another element that I cannot identify. Atomic weights, Watson, as your Mary also noticed. She’s a sharp one, your wife.” His gray eyes glittered, keen as a hawk’s, and he flashed me a smile.

“She is on par with another woman we once knew, yes?”

“You’re a lucky man, Watson,” he replied, and then, “I think I understand enough about the mystery of the tram machine building to offer a solution.” His eyes sparkled mischievously.

“For heaven’s sake, tell me!” I exclaimed. Yet he stared silently from the window, and I could see from his distant expression that he was lost in thought.

The horses swung left and trotted by the Loire, which sparkled under a faint sun. Lovers drifted along the dirt path winding by the river, and clouds drifted overhead as if following them.

The Château de Blois towered above us with its steep medieval walls, constructed from limestone hauled from our destination, near the former home of Monsieur Marceau Poisson. In fact, the limestone quarries were the reasons for the vast tunnel systems. For hundreds of years, people had been digging up the limestone and carting it throughout the Loire Valley to build everything from castles and fortresses to more modest dwellings.

The horses grunted, laboring to make it up the slope past the château, then settled into a steady trot as we made our way through the countryside. I lost myself in the haze of sun-dappled leaves, drifting clouds, and the steady rhythm of the hooves.

“A chemical reaction retains the same elements after they combine.”

Startled by Holmes’s voice, I jumped. Composing myself, I concurred. “This makes sense,” I said. “Elements can’t disappear. They just re-form in some way.”

“In the way that mixing equal proportions of mercury, Hg, and chlorine, Cl, result in perchloride of mercury. You end up with the same elements, mercury and chlorine, just re-formed into perchloride of mercury, a corrosive sublimate. This is a deadly poison.”

“With mere egg whites often used for treatment.”

“A better use, perhaps, than for the omelets served by Mrs. Hinds at the Loggerheads,” Holmes said, and added, “good as they are, of course. But returning to the topic at hand—that of lead, Pb, and phosphorus, P, combined to yield gold, Au, and another unknown element. How does it happen? If not alchemy, then what?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but surely, we won’t shut down the machine by smearing egg whites on it.”

He frowned at me.

“A joke,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Egg whites have nothing to do with *our* chemical reaction, Watson.”

A medieval church sprang from nowhere on my left, shrouded by pines and drooping trees thick with leaves. Carved elaborately, it was grayish-white. Limestone, a soft rock, was easy to carve yet less likely to stand the test of time than, say, marble. Yet oddly, all the buildings we passed were limestone, and remained standing after hundreds of years.

“Lost in the scenery?”

“No,” I responded, “just thinking about the logic of our problems.”

He nodded briskly. “I have been studying the atomic weights in Mendeleev’s periodic table. As we know, lead’s atomic weight is 207. Phosphorus’ atomic weight is 31. In simple mathematical notation, Pb plus P. In the machine building’s pit, they yield gold, Au, which has an atomic weight of 197.”

“But I have seen Mendeleev’s 1871 table, and it gives gold an atomic weight of 199,” I objected.

“True,” Holmes said with a chuckle. “It is complex, Watson. Mendeleev’s 1869 table postulated that gold has an atomic weight of 197. There was an article earlier this year in *Chemical News*, written by J. W. Mallet, a professor of chemistry. Via a series of experiments, Mallet proved that gold has an atomic weight of 197 rather than 199, as Mendeleev claimed in his 1871 table.”

“Remarkable,” I exclaimed.

Holmes took my pen and wrote in my notebook.

$$^{207}\mathrm{Pb} + {}^{31}\mathrm{P} \rightarrow {}^{197}\mathrm{Au} + {}^{41}\mathrm{X}$$

He handed the notebook back to me.

“This is a rudimentary equation,” he said. “Lead and phosphorus should not yield gold, according to the laws of chemistry as we know them today. Yet this does happen in Willie Jacobs’s building, specifically in his phosphorus pit. Hence we have an unknown product or products of atomic weight 41, which I term X. I will also add that we have an unknown catalyst, Watson, something that takes lead and phosphorus and somehow creates gold and our mystery X.”

“I’m an educated man, Holmes, yet I’ve never seen this sort of notation.”

“I devised it for the sake of explanation,” he admitted. “Consider, Watson, that mass cannot disappear. It re-forms.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“Jacobs puts lead and phosphorus into the pit. Gold appears. Another element, our mystery X, also appears, yet we don’t see it. Perhaps it is a gas without smell?” He fell silent, considering, and this time I remained quiet. Then he pointed to the equation he’d written in my notebook.

“A catalyst is involved, Watson, something we do not observe using our modern science. That catalyst energizes the machine. It energizes the lead and phosphorus to produce gold and our mystery X. We may not know what the catalyst is, but I assure you—it is there, and it is not magic.”

“But what makes you think these elements and this unknown catalyst energize the tram machine?” I asked.

“Jacobs feeds the elements into the pit. The machine becomes *quite* energized, Watson. Indeed, it almost killed you, as I recall.”

“That is why it’s so hard to shut down,” I exclaimed. “Because the machine obtains its energy from—”

“—*somewhere else*.” Holmes finished my sentence.

“But from where?”

“This, I do not know. Possibly deep beneath the earth, far under the pit.” His frown returned. “I can only conjecture, and I prefer not to do so without more information at my disposal.”

I stared at Holmes’s equation.

“On the left side,” I said, “we have 207 plus 31, which totals 238. On the right side, we have 197 plus X, which when added, should also total 238.”

“Correct. Because elements don’t simply disappear. They re-form. So we are missing an element whose atomic weight should be 41. While calcium, Ca, has an atomic weight of 40 in Mendeleev’s table, we do not yet know of an element with an atomic weight of 41. Again, this is conjecture, and I prefer—”

“Yes,” I interjected, “I understand.”

“Write this down in your notebook, Watson,” he instructed. “There is nothing magical, nothing that transmutes one natural substance into another, no way to turn lead into gold via divine forces, no elixir of life, no universal remedies,” he insisted. “We seek a catalyst, a force as real as lead and phosphorus and gold, and a product—possibly an element as real as any other, one that we simply have not discovered yet.”

He paused dramatically as I scribbled.

“Write this down, as well,” he said. “The unknown catalyst may be connected to the bizarre and deadly dimensions of the tram machine building, the barn, and the Blois tunnels that have exploded. Even though this catalyst remains elusive, Watson, with some experimentation, I suspect that I *can* reduce the threat of the tram machine.”

Abruptly, the carriage stopped, and the horses snorted, pawing the dirt road. The driver’s feet hit earth, and he swung open the door next to me.

“*L’ancienne maison de Monsieur Marceau Poisson,*” he said. “*Faites très attention. Le diable vit ici maintenant*.”

Holmes clambered out of the carriage after me.

“Don’t worry, Watson. There are no devils here.” He paid the driver, who muttered about demons and death, and then left us alone at the exploded ruins of Marceau Poisson’s home and wine bar.

The limestone hut had crumbled in the explosion, and picking through the debris, we noted fragments of charred wood, “presumably furnishings,” as Holmes said, but there was little left of Poisson’s hut itself. Just a heap of limestone chips and dust in front of a tunnel entrance, ragged and wide. The

police had hacked large chunks of rock out of the rubble, enabling us to enter the tunnel system.

“Looks as if they used axes,” I commented. “You might be disappointed, Holmes, in what we find inside. They’ve grossly tampered with the crime scene.”

“And yet, there will be blood, wine, and bone,” he said. He shifted his deerstalker farther back on his head, pulled out a lantern, and moved into the darkness.

I poked at the rubble, careful not to put too much weight on my injured leg as I leaned closer to the tunnel entrance. A marble object protruded from the splintered rock at eye level. I leaned yet closer.

“What’s this?” I said.

Holmes scrambled over. He set his pocket lantern down, careful not to extinguish the candle inside it. Then he eased me away from the object, grabbed it with both hands, and pulled. It didn’t yield. He widened his legs, stood more securely, then tried again.

This time, it came out of the limestone with such force that Holmes fell back. He cried out and landed on his posterior. Gingerly, he stood again, holding his back with one hand while grasping the object with his other.

“Well, we’ve certainly come to the right place. We’ve seen this set of symbols before.” He handed me a nonagon, carved with three octopuses and various odd symbols.

Tentacles swirled down from the octopuses and embraced a family name. *Poisson*.

“Fish,” Holmes said, “and while Marceau means little warrior, it also contains the letters e-a-u… Water.”

Apparently, Marceau Poisson was as strange as Lord Wiltshram and Lord Ashberton, for he, too, had been of the Order of Dagon. I began to wonder just how widespread the order was. Did it exist worldwide? How many people were part of it?

More to the point, why were they killing people?

Holmes flicked powdered limestone from his jacket and trousers. Finding that the nine-sided object was too large to fit into his pocket and too cumbersome to carry along with his lantern, he tucked it beneath some rubble.

“That should keep it safe for now,” he said. “Come, Watson.”

We stepped inside the dark tunnel leading to Marceau Poisson’s death chamber.

Holding the lantern aloft, Holmes surveyed the darkness ahead of us. The floor was a jigsaw of limestone of all shapes and thicknesses raggedly jumbled together. The walls had crumbled in spots, heaving rubble and dust onto the floor. The ceiling dipped along the center, forming a low-hanging bulge down its length. Spider-web veins in bas relief stretched in all directions from the bulge across the rest of the ceiling and down the walls, and then branched over the rubble.

“Like inverted cracks,” Holmes murmured.

“Except cracks like that don’t extend across stone and continue over piles of newly fallen rubble.”

“Be careful where you step, Watson. I don’t trust this floor.” Holmes held my elbow as we inched down the tunnel into the black. I tested each stone before putting my full weight on it. Some wobbled, some tilted, and others literally broke with the most gentle touch of my shoes.

The candle inside the lantern flickered low, casting scant light. I feared it would extinguish, leaving us in utter darkness, making our way over an unstable floor through a narrow passageway. We could stumble, trip, die here. The walls could cave in, the ceiling fall. Plus, if the candle went out, there’d be no way back for us.

Holmes reached into a pocket, then cursed when he discovered that the replacement candle he kept there had been dislodged in his fall. The creases on his forehead and the tightness of his lips told me that he was calculating the odds of getting out of the tunnels alive.

He held the lantern aloft.

“Up ahead, a kink to the right. It’s only a few short steps,” he said, keeping his voice low. A splotch of black marked a tunnel opening to the right, but it required far more than a few short steps.

“Why, Holmes, that ‘kink’ is twenty feet from here!”

“I *must* see the crime scene,” he insisted. “We’ve traveled a long way. We *must* see it through.”

He turned his body to the side and shuffled past a mound of rubble, ducking under the low ceiling. I did the same, my heart hammering loudly. I was afraid to lean against the spider-web walls or to brush the bulge hanging an inch over my head. What if the entire structure collapsed? After all, this was an old quarry, and an odd one, at that.

Dust caked my nostrils, and I sneezed repeatedly. The sounds reverberated off the strange dimensions of the rock formations and echoed long and low through the corridors. From the patterns of the echoes, I could tell that the tunnels were as multi-branched as the spider-webs crawling over the ceilings and down the walls.

Far away, something crashed, and thunder rumbled.

"A tunnel caved in," Holmes whispered.

I stopped in my tracks and clenched his arm. My heart was so loud I feared it would explode in my chest, or more likely, that I would keel over and die.

"This is too dangerous," I whispered back. "I say we turn around."

"No. We must continue. I must see it."

"But Holmes—"

"*Come*."

I dug into my jacket pocket and withdrew a cloth, which I held over my face, hoping to fend off the dust. We inched over the litter as the candle sputtered and melted inside Holmes's lantern.

"Halfway, Watson, the candle has burned halfway. We need to turn back, and soon."

I had no problem with that. We could turn back now, and I'd be happy.

"*La poussière á la poussière*," Holmes whispered, pointing ahead to where the lantern splattered light. My blood ran cold.

Dust to dust…

"*Les ossements des morts*."

The bones of the dead…

Everywhere I looked, stacks of bones were arranged in ways that defied gravity. A bone the size and shape of a femur sticking out of the tunnel floor, holding the bones of what could be an entire corpse on it. An upside-down skull holding an upside-down pyramid of tiny bones—could they be phalanges, carpi, vertebrae?

"Are they human?" Holmes whispered.

I crept closer.

"Hold the light near," I said, and he complied. An orb of white rested on what appeared to be five mismatched ilia— hip bones—and several broken ribcages. Holmes shifted the lantern, and the orb illuminated another stack, this one with bones I couldn't identify. A horn? Antlers? The hinged bones of snakes?

He pulled out his magnifying lens and stooped, gesturing for me to do the same. I squatted beside him, and when he handed me the lens, his eyes glowed with excitement.

“The same thing we saw with Amos Beiler’s bones! The same stains!”

Coughing from dust, my eyes tearing, I struggled to examine the pelvic girdle displayed on top of a heap of antlers and horns—or what passed as such. Along with what might have been dried human blood was the same type of splotch we saw on Amos Beiler’s pelvic girdle. Oval with jellyfish-like tendrils, the stain itself caught the light in cubes, heptagons, and other shapes I didn’t know.

We were, once again, in the domain of the unknown.

This was unlike the deaths of Lord Wiltshram and the luckless girl found recently with the gold collar button and the note by Lestrade and his men. The murders before us had been committed by the same man—or men—who had killed Beiler and Jacobs. These murders were seemingly impossible to explain.

“Do you ask yourself, Watson, why we see only bones here? Where did the rest of the corpses go? Where’s the flesh, the *meat*?”

Startled, I realized that Holmes was right. We should have found much more than odd stacks of bones. We should have found evidence of burned corpses, the remains of men, minimally char-blackened bone. But all of these bones were smooth and of light shades. Almost as if they’d been polished.

“The wine bar of Marceau Poisson,” Holmes said, ducking into a hole in the wall to our right.

Not wanting to part ways—*not down here in this strange and horrifying tomb*—I quickly scrambled up and limped after him. Dark patches—either blood or red wine—stained the rock beneath my feet. Again, I thought, *why didn’t the fire burn off the stains and leave the rocks black?*

“You know what limestone is?” Holmes asked, as he trained the feeble light on a stone slab set in the middle of the floor which tilted slightly, perhaps fifteen degrees, from wall to wall.

Certainly, I knew about limestone. “The shells of extinct sea creatures,” I said, “possibly the remains of coral. It contains much calcium, which is why we have limestone kilns all over England. Farmers use the burned quicklime on bad soil.”

“And this stone slab—” Holmes said. “It looks like a ritual killing slab, where cultists might make sacrifices to their gods.” He stared more closely. “There’s a recent sacrifice burned into this slab. Look at this imprint, Watson!”

It was no skeleton. Rather, it was—as Holmes defined it—an *imprint* of a skeleton, charred into the stone. Less than five feet long with bowed legs, webbed feet and hands, and the stunted body of a frog.

In fact…

“It had the head of a frog,” I told Holmes. “Four long frog fingers and five extremely long frog toes, all of the digits webbed to support their length and narrow aspect. What are we looking at, the remains of a giant frog?”

“It appears so. Well, I don’t think Professor Moriarty came all the way to France and into these tunnels in order to kill a giant frog,” Holmes said drily. “I also don’t think our London murderer, the one who killed the young woman, has been burning the impression of a giant frog into the caves of France.

“There’s nothing to suggest that Lord Wiltshram’s killer was here, either,” he added. “No, that particular murder was done by a man wielding a knife, who slaughtered Wiltshram like an animal.”

“A butcher?” I suggested.

“If so, one with little skill and a lot of anger.”

The candle burned low, and I reminded Holmes that we had to get out of the tunnels, and quickly. He nodded, that yes, he agreed, but turned slowly and once more gazed around the chamber as if memorizing its contents and dimensions. And that’s when we noticed the ceiling.

Rock bulged in an oblong shape directly over the stone slab. Frilled around the oblong, stone filaments hung several inches down, curled and wavy like hair.

“What do you think this means?” I exclaimed, and was startled by the echo of my own voice. But Holmes was as baffled as I was. He shrugged and shook his head. As he did, I noticed another absence.

“Do you think the policeman who found the ancient drawings also stole any gold chunks that might have been here?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think he found any, Watson. Gold has been found at only *one* crime scene—specifically, in the tram machine building. Nowhere else.”

“And exactly where did the policeman say he found the drawings?”

“Wedged in a wall deep inside the labyrinth of tunnels. Look, Watson, over there.” Holmes swung the lantern toward the wall opposite the chamber’s entrance. With alarm, I saw that the candle within the lantern had burned low. We had to get out of this tomb, and *fast*.

Holmes stood still and stared at the opposite wall. Embedded in the limestone was a rectangle of gray, striated rock. Thousands of light dots clustered in odd formations on the right side of the rectangle. Vertical waves, dark, formed the left side. As I stared, the dots and the waves began to *move*, slowly at first and then more rapidly.

Holmes grabbed my arm.

“What’s wrong, Watson?”

“The woman!” I cried. “Don’t you see her?”

“What woman? Have you gone mad?” He stared for a long moment, then turned toward me. “Come now, it’s time to return to reality. Hurry, Watson, before the candle burns out!”

*

Her image will be burned into my eyes for the rest of time.

She was like the Mona Lisa, but older. Gray hair, a penetrating gaze, a wisp of a smile, and in her hands she held an embroidery hoop and a needle.

On the floor beneath the woman rolled a single bone sphere.

Holmes scooped it up, and then I let him drag me away.

31
DR. JOHN WATSON

London

The rocking-chair was empty. It was cold to the touch.

Where was Mary?

I raced through our small rooms, calling her name.

She didn’t answer.

Had she gone to the market? If so, how had she gotten past the policemen standing guard across the street? They’d just told me, *“All is fine, don’t worry, Dr. Watson, your wife and baby are safe and sound inside your home.”* But the police were wrong! My wife and baby had been abducted again.

“Don’t worry,” Holmes said, easing me into a blue upholstered chair. I settled against the cushions and covered my face with my hands. He squeezed my shoulder, holding a pipe with his other hand and puffing. The smell of his tobacco comforted me. He would know what to do, how to find them. If anyone could help me, it would be Sherlock Holmes.

“Watson. Listen, dear fellow, to logic. Don’t let emotions rule, and hysteria take hold. Look at your rug. When last I was here, I noticed its placement, exactly six inches away from that wall over there, exactly aligned on the third floor board.” He released his grip on me and pointed. Smoke curled from his lips. It was sweet and brought me back to simpler times, when I roomed with him at 221B Baker Street.

“What about the rug?” I asked, wiping away a tear when he wasn’t looking. I pulled myself together, forcing myself not to think about my missing Samuel, and where he might be. It was a hard thing to do.

“There is no evidence of a scuffle or a kidnapping,” Holmes said. “No dirt from outside boots on the rug or the wood. No scuff marks in the pile, and the rug itself is firmly upon the floor in the exact location I last saw it. It hasn’t curled up anywhere, nor has it shifted on the floor. And look, Watson,” he added, turning to point, “at the two large vases on the side tables. Neither has so much as shifted upon Mary’s doilies, nor are they broken. The chair upon which you sit is still in the position I last saw it. The painting of Mary’s father remains on the wall, perfectly positioned, nothing askew.”

He turned and smiled at me, eyes twinkling. His pipe had dimmed.

“I suggest that Mary and Samuel are perfectly safe, out buying bread or brandy for you. I suggest that they slipped past the policemen who have not—as you know—the keenest of intellects.”

“But surely, you must admit that at least one officer of all of those surrounding my home would have seen my wife,” I argued. “After all, she goes nowhere without the baby. How could all of them have failed to notice her leaving the house? And why wouldn’t she have simply *told* them that she was going? No, Holmes, I fear that, in this, you’re wrong.”

“I assure you, there is a reason.” Holmes reached into his pocket and brought out a stick match with a white head. He scraped the match head against my fireplace, lit it, and held the flame over his pipe, drawing in smoke repeatedly until the tobacco glowed in the bowl.

“A friction match,” he commented, “invented by John Walker in 1826. Originally called lucifers, and they smelled horrible. Later, the French chemist Charles Sauria invented a match that did not reek as badly as the lucifers, but these new matches, still used today, contained white phosphorus even back then.” He raised his eyebrows, and his gray eyes were sharp. He wanted a response from me, but what?

“I’m sorry, I’m not following you,” I said.

“Gustaf Erik Pasch, a Swedish chemist, invented reliable matches that light with red phosphorus a decade ago. I’m hoping that someday soon, our factories will produce matches using red phosphorus exclusively, rather than white.”

“*Willie Jacobs!*” I cried, slapping my knees with both hands and half-rising from my chair. “But of course! He has the white phossy jaw of the factory workers, the poor women who slave away making those very matches you hold now, Holmes. Those poor women with their rotting jaws.”

My friend settled into the chair opposite me and smoothed down his trousers. He puffed on his pipe.

“Yes,” he said. “Willie Jacobs has phossy jaw, just like those poor women. He told us that he obtains the phosphorus for his blasphemous machine from the white match factories. He has been subjected to those fumes, those chemicals, since he could walk. Remember as well, those fumes are thick in the tram machine building. He’s been feeding that machine white phosphorus on a steady basis. The feeding pit glows with the stuff. It’s a wonder Willie Jacobs isn’t dead already.”

I'd seen factory workers without teeth, with exposed jawbones. There were cases in which those afflicted had pus flowing from their mouths. The disease was powerful, painful, and terrible: there was no known cure.

My mind churned through the possibilities.

"Jacobs has complained of sensitive gum tissue and aching teeth. I've noticed that he's lost teeth, as well. His facial skin is bloated and sallow. No pus from his mouth. No ulcerated openings. He does have scabs on his lower face, evidence of rot. If he bathes, he does not smell bad. There are no malodorous discharges."

"Willie Jacobs is not in the end stages," Holmes added. "Thankfully, his jawbone seems largely unexposed despite the necrosis."

"This might be the cause of his odd behavior, too," I said. "The batting of his nostrils, the poking, the jabbing. The scabs on his lower face must hurt terribly, and possibly he deals with it by jabbing at a nearby area unaffected by the actual disease."

"Just as a person scratches constantly near an itchy, scabbing cut on his skin," Holmes said. It was a sobering thought. The necrosis would continue to spread and rot Willie Jacobs's face, and eventually it could kill him. The only treatment was a painful and typically deadly surgery, in which a doctor gave a patient chloroform and then removed his jawbone.

"I intend to enlist Mr. Jacobs's help," Holmes revealed, "with a chemical experiment in the tram machine building. Lead and phosphorus. Gold. I want you to be there, of course."

"I'm a doctor, not an alchemist, Holmes."

"As such, you should do very well documenting this case to its conclusion." He clapped his hands together. "Ah, the excitement of chemistry! Imagine that, Watson, in the pages of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*!"

"I hear that a new magazine, *The Strand*, will be published in but a few months, with a chief focus on stories. I'm thinking of sending them my scribblings about our adventures, rather than to *Lippincott's*. What do you think?"

"What does it matter, truly, where you sell your 'scribblings,' as you call them?"

I bristled.

"These are tributes, Holmes, to you," I said, "and only a moment ago you were excited to think that I might put you in the pages of *Lippincott's*."

“No,” he corrected me, “I was excited to think that the readers would receive a dose of knowledge. They know so little about science, it boggles the mind. As long as the uninformed learn something, I am pleased.” He turned and scanned the room.

“And now, enough of your poetic yearnings, Doctor. Mary is being slow about getting that brandy. We must check thoroughly for a note from her, some indication as to where she went. Perhaps you share a private drawer, or perhaps she has a jewelry box? Might there be some clue as to her location in the room where you sleep?”

Again, I bristled and my lips tightened. I kept quiet, however, for there was such a place. It was more important to find Mary than to quibble with Holmes about my writing. I stood and moved toward the hallway, and he followed me into the room I shared with my family.

The bed was tidy, sheets and blankets pulled up, pillows fluffed as usual. The baby’s toys and blankets were intact in the crib. I pulled open some drawers—Mary’s clothes and lingerie, everything of Samuel’s, all intact. Her dresses hung in the closet. Perhaps Holmes was right, and my wife would soon return home and throw her arms around me, so happy to see me again. She would make my favorite tea, give me a plate of biscuits.

I would swear never to leave her again.

This time I would mean it.

“What is *this*?” Holmes called to me from my wife’s side of the bed. His finger wiped something from her night table. “It’s waxy,” he said, “theatrical makeup such as the type you and I used when we disguised ourselves as itinerant workers in Avebury.” He squatted, took out his lens, and peered at the table, then lifted a strand between two fingers. “A wig,” he said. “Your wife left home in disguise, Watson.”

I was stunned, unable to know what it could mean.

“And the baby?” I asked. “Samuel?”

“The baby, ah, the baby, probably tucked in her coat so as to be unnoticed by the police standing guard.”

“But… *why?*”

He didn’t answer. He just looked very sad.

By contrast, I became very angry. How could Mary do this to me? How could she take our son and leave without explanation? How, why—what was her purpose?

Crouching, I pried up a loose floorboard beneath the edge of the bed. It was close to my side, where I slept, and it was where I kept valuables. Nobody knew about the hiding place but Mary.

My fingers clawed around the space beneath the loose board. There were coins, ammunition, but…

"No note, no paper," I muttered. "Nothing!"

"Watson, please—"

"No!" I said sharply. "I will *not* relax. I *will* worry, Holmes. Oh, God help me, what is this?"

My hand found something else, and I pulled it from the hiding place. Instantly, my chest went tight. Mary's locket-heart necklace, the one she never took off for any reason, the one I'd given her as a wedding gift. I crouched on the floor, huddled over the locket. I unclasped it. Inside was the photograph of me, smiling, glowing with the love I'd had for her when we wed.

"She left this here," I told Holmes, "knowing I would find it."

"And her wedding ring?" he asked quietly.

"Not here. She still has it." A spot of relief washed over me. At least my wife still wore her ring. There was hope for my marriage yet.

"She put the necklace in your private hiding spot, Watson, to tell you that she's safe," Holmes suggested, "that she left on her own accord, that's all. She's still your wife."

"And the disguise?"

His smile was thin.

"She's known about our disguises for years, hasn't she? You write about them in your stories, Watson. Perhaps you've even told her what we use when we don them, yes?"

I nodded, weakly.

"And so she disguised herself and walked right past her guards to get away from here. She didn't leave you, Watson. She left the danger of living with you."

"I must find them," I said.

"We will insist that Lestrade put the forces of Scotland Yard to work on finding her. If his men had been more alert, and even vaguely skilled—"

"—she would still be here."

"Come, Watson," my friend said, his voice sharp. "Let us return to Baker Street. Let me get you away from here, where it's so depressing for you

right now. Come. Mrs. Hudson will prepare a wonderful meal, and it will revive you. I will send word immediately to Lestrade. All will be well, I give you my word."

I believed him. Sherlock Holmes didn't give promises lightly.

And yet my heart was broken. I would never feel happiness again if Mary and Samuel did not return to me, and safely.

32

There’s a certain hysteria that can gurgle up and then burst like a geyser from people diagnosed with terrible illnesses. I’d seen this hysteria many times over the years at my practice, and had learned to wall myself off from emotion when delivering bad news to patients. Thus when they broke down, I could be the reassuring and comforting force. I had to view my patients with clinical objectivity.

I’d failed to save Mr. Travelston’s life. His widow sat quietly while I gave her the news, that her husband was dead. Then the hysteria had sputtered and burst forth, and she’d broken down, crying and wailing, unable to move beyond the terror, the loss, the misery. She’d lost her husband, father of her four young children, her companion, her beloved. Lost, feeling utterly hopeless. Life had spiraled out of her control into the realm of death.

Now I understood.

My wife had left me, taking our infant with her. I felt empty, lost, hopeless, that my own life had spiraled out of my control. Yet I tried to achieve perspective—Mary wasn’t dead. Surely there remained hope for us, though I felt nothing but despair. I’d always been the person to comfort others.

Who was there to comfort me?

“Dr. Watson, you’ve not touched a bite,” Mrs. Hudson fussed. “You need to keep your strength up, especially on so foul a day. Please, eat a little.” She pushed the bowl of now-lukewarm ox-tail soup toward me. She knew it was one of my favorites, but the fragrance, usually so tantalizing that I couldn’t resist, made me feel ill.

Holmes leaned on the mantel, tapping his pipe. He refilled it and pressed down the tobacco, then struck a match. He wore fresh clothes—a starched white shirt, black silk tie crossed beneath the collar, black wool jacket and matching trousers. His black hair was immaculately clean and smoothed back off his face, parted off-center. His stomach growled, but he did not touch his soup, probably out of deference to my sensibilities.

“Mrs. Hudson, he’s worried about Mary and Samuel,” Holmes said. “They’ve disappeared.”

She gasped, and her hand flew to her mouth.

“Disappeared how? What do you mean? Do you mean they…?” She trailed off. I could feel the hysteria rising in her, it was palpable. Her face went white.

“No, he doesn’t mean *that*,” I said, reassuring her. “I’m sure they’re fine. They’re probably just in the country, taking a brief respite from the London —”

“—crime wave?” she said.

“I was going to say ‘from the London cold,’ but… yes, Mrs. Hudson, you are correct.”

She relaxed visibly, normal color returning to her cheeks. “Then she is best off where she is, sir.” She turned on her tenant, her eyes flashing angrily. “Mr. Holmes, how dare you scare me like that? Disappeared, indeed!”

I didn’t have the energy to tell her the truth of the matter. Neither did Holmes. He didn’t even look at her. He just waved his hand languidly toward the door.

From the floor below, the street door banged, and a man called loudly.

“Mr. Holmes? Sherlock Holmes? Someone smarter than you has sent me!”

Footsteps pounded up the stairs. Mrs. Hudson opened the door to our sitting room and slipped out just as a man rushed in to take her place.

Like Holmes, he was tall and thin, but balding. His sharp features reminded me of an eagle or hawk. He had an angular face, glittering eyes, a furrowed brow, and a downturned mouth. He wore a long coat and held a top hat.

“Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I presume. Consulting detective?” he said with a slight sneer.

“Lackey of Professor Moriarty, I presume?” Holmes said.

At that, the man bristled.

“Brother,” he said curtly.

Holmes chuckled, and seeing the look on my face, added, “Not the man himself, but the *brother* to a man who thinks of himself as a ‘consulting crime lord.’”

“Are you suggesting that my brother gives advice to syndicates weaker than his own?” our visitor replied. “And why should he do that?” Moriarty’s brother set his top hat on the chemistry bench and unbuttoned his coat. Both

were soaked with rain. Water pooled around the hat, and he shook his coat over Holmes's rug.

I wondered if Holmes was correct in thinking Moriarty was *not* behind the attack on my family, but I knew better than to lead the questioning and get in Holmes's way. So for now, I remained silent.

Our visitor's head shifted left to right, right to left, as he peered at his surroundings, taking in the work environment and home of his brother's greatest nemesis. He appeared amused by the chemistry apparatus, the slipper of tobacco, the open drawer with the needle glimmering in its mahogany box.

I was reminded of the relationship between Sherlock Holmes, the great detective, and his own brother, Mycroft. The two shared immense intellect, but their appearances couldn't have differed more. Had I seen them on the street, I could not have guessed that they were brothers. I wondered how similar Moriarty's brother was to Holmes's mysterious foe.

Outside, the rain pounded the streets.

Mrs. Hudson's clock chimed nine times.

"What brings you here?" Holmes slammed his drawer shut, then arranged himself in his favorite chair, long legs crossed, elbows on the armrests, mouth wrapped around his pipe stem, puffing between comments. "Do you need my help?" he continued. "Is this a consultation, perhaps concerning a crime that you want me to solve? Has someone offended you, sir? Done you harm?" A slight smile crossed his face. "And you can't think your way out of it. Your brother is of no help and tells you to come to me. And what is *your* name, may I ask?"

"Ha!" The man barked, his mouth still downturned, his head still shifting as he studied Holmes's domain. "My name is Moriarty, of course. Why don't you call me, James?" He chuckled drily. "Mr. Holmes, don't flatter yourself. My brother's integrity and conscience are distinctly better than yours, and his intellect far surpasses your own."

This time, it was Holmes who laughed, but his eyes grew hard as the man continued.

"Unlike you, my brother and I don't rob the graves of the freshly departed. Unlike you, we don't risk the lives of newborn babies. Unlike you, we don't rely on incompetent policemen to do our work for us." He leaned forward, his eyes glittering. "And unlike you, my brother is revered

as the best in his field—unique, untouchable, unstoppable, and unrivalled in all ways.

"What are you, Holmes, other than a glorified policeman? You might as well wear a bobby's uniform and carry a club."

"I hope you're done," Holmes said. "Now tell me why you are here, and why I shouldn't have you removed on the spot."

While I moved to the desk and sat on its edge, Moriarty's brother tossed himself onto the chair opposite Holmes. Then he slung one lanky leg over the other, looking vaguely like Holmes's mirror image.

"Let's start with your second question first," he suggested. "You won't have me removed because, by the time you send your servant here for help —" the man gestured toward me "—I will be long gone. Your man can try to restrain me, if he dares, but it won't work out." He patted his coat pocket. "You see, I come equipped with a gun, and I have never hesitated to use it, when necessary."

"Very well, you've come prepared," Holmes responded. "What *is* the purpose of your charming company?"

"There's someone out there who is more canny than you, and even more canny than my brother," Moriarty began. "My brother wasn't in France when that tunnel blew up and killed those men. He wasn't in London when the tram machine went berserk, nor was he in the countryside, mingling with furniture polishers when those killings occurred."

"And your brother's men, his hired killers and thieves?" I interjected. "What about them?"

"Please, Dr. Watson," our visitor said, as if to a child. "My brother has men everywhere—that's how we know all of this. Your question is a silly one." He didn't look at me, but kept his eyes trained directly at Holmes. He had brushed me aside as if I were a pesky flea. "You might ask yourself," he said, "who was behind these killings? Is there a vast criminal underground, a conspiracy, in England? If my brother is not behind these crimes—which I can assure you he is not—then *who* is responsible?"

Holmes shrugged. He rose and set his pipe on its stand, put his hands in his pockets, and began to pace. Now and then he stopped and stared at our visitor, then paced again. Moriarty's brother sat quietly, fingers steepled beneath his chin—a habit peculiar, I'd always thought, to Holmes. The man's eyes narrowed to half-slits, another habit Holmes exhibited when deep in thought.

Holmes stopped pacing, and Moriarty's eyes lifted. The great detective stood directly over the chair, while his visitor peered up at him.

"You admit that your brother sent a note to Dr. Watson's wife and baby in Watson's hand in order to direct them to Whitechapel High Street? That he drove them to Randolph's Cigars and Fine Liquors?"

The man's chin dipped slightly. "Yes."

"Your brother wanted to scare Dr. Watson away from helping me, to show that he could take them anywhere, do whatever he wanted, possibly harm or kill them?"

Another dip. *Yes*.

"But you eventually surmised that Dr. Watson's help might not be of sufficient use to me in pinpointing the killer's identity."

"Now just a minute!" I said, rising slightly, but Holmes ignored me—as did his visitor, who again nodded, *Yes*.

I sputtered and sat back on the edge of the desk.

"The reason being that this killer is not part of your organization, is not under your control, is not someone known to you. In fact, you want me to identify the killer and have him arrested. You initially thought you could do this on your own, didn't you? But now you realize that I am required. You want Dr. Watson to help me because any help is better than no help in this matter, correct?"

"Holmes!" I cried. "That is enough!" He flicked his hand at me but did not take his eyes off Moriarty's brother.

"Be calm, Doctor," Holmes said. "This matter has nothing to do with you. It has to do with the nature of the killer."

"Yes…" our visitor said slowly, "it has to do with the *nature* of the killer."

"You even sent a man to warn me through my housekeeper, Mrs. Hudson, did you not?"

Another nod.

"Then I suggest that the killer is a threat to your brother in some way," Holmes continued. "He threatens to dismantle your criminal enterprise, doesn't he? He threatens to become more wealthy, more powerful. Am I right?"

"A lot of our men have defected to this new organization," Moriarty said. "They've taken over portions of my brother's business—that is, *legitimate* business activities. My brother wants his men back. We want this gang shut

down. We want England—and in particular, London—to be ours again. We don't ordinarily like you prying into our business, but now my… brother realizes that you can be useful to our endeavors."

"What is the name of this gang?" Holmes asked pointedly. "Do you perhaps know it as the Order of Dagon?" Holmes's words startled his visitor, who jumped from the chair, eyes blazing. Before either of us could react, he grabbed Holmes's collar.

"Yes! It is the Order of Dagon! They have accumulated much wealth, seemingly out of thin air. It is this fiendish cult, this gang, that's been murdering people all over England. They've killed some of our most valuable men. They kill ritualistically, as if they are making human sacrifices to ancient, pagan gods—they take our men to beaches and build mounds of the remains. They pretend to be led by Druids, but they are not. No, they're something else, Mr. Holmes, something smarter, bigger… something we've never seen before. You can't know what you're up against."

Holmes slowly pried the man's hands off his shirt.

"I've heard there was a murder on a Dorset beach, at Half Moon Bay, something akin to what you describe, a sacrificial mound. A woman."

"It's them!" Moriarty's brother cried.

"And you want me to…?"

"I want you to stop them, have your bobby friends arrest them, get them off the streets… drive them from our shores altogether."

Holmes glanced at me, and I shook my head, *No*.

When Moriarty's brother glared at me, his lips curling into a sneer, finally I lost my patience.

"Why should we believe you, or trust you in any way?" I asked. "You admit that your brother took my family under false pretenses. If not for your brother, my family would still be with…" I stopped, not wanting him to know anything about Mary and Samuel, or their whereabouts. "Tell me," I continued, stepping closer, "did your brother order a man to enter my home, break a gas pipe in my kitchen, and threaten my family? Did you? Why didn't the attacker just kill them?"

I stood over him menacingly, but he didn't give ground. Holmes had to ease me off, and Moriarty's brother fell back into the chair, a grim expression on his face.

“I did no such thing,” he said, “and neither did my brother. I tell you, it’s this gang. They sent someone to scare you off, much as I had earlier, before I realized that we couldn’t defeat them on our own.”

“They probably thought it would go one of two ways,” Holmes said, nudging me into his own chair while he paced again. I didn’t feel like sitting down. I wanted to wrap my hands around the man’s neck. I didn’t believe him. His brother had sent that man to gas Mary and the baby. Moriarty, and only Moriarty, was behind all of this.

I was sure of it.

Holmes didn’t agree with me.

“I believe it *was* this gang, this cult, whatever you might want to term this organization known as the Order of Dagon,” he said. “*They* sent the attacker. Most likely, his orders were to kill your family, but he didn’t have it in him to suffocate, strangle, or knife a newborn baby. He was weak. He went with the gas. If the gas killed Mary and Samuel, *he* didn’t care. If the gas didn’t quite kill Mary and Samuel yet scared you off, Watson—and by extension, perhaps even me—then it would suit him, and by extension, his masters.

“What they didn’t count on was the presence of Mr. Willie Jacobs, who, by his own account, fought hard to save Mary and Samuel. The attacker wasn’t supposed to remain in your flat, Watson. Jacobs hurt him badly.”

Willie Jacobs.

I owed the lives of Mary and Samuel to Willie Jacobs.

“If you and Watson had stopped interfering, my brother could have taken over the Order of Dagon, incorporated them into his own… enterprises,” our visitor said. “It would have been easier to avoid Lestrade’s attention without you always in the way, breathing down our necks. But now…”

“I know why you’re here,” Holmes said. “Your brother wants me to do his dirty work for him. Tell me, why doesn’t he come to me directly? Why does he send you?”

“He is… incommunicado,” Moriarty said. “Doing other things. You’re not as important to him as you think. He often sends me in his charge. He trusts me, for I know all. I’m his brother.”

“I think your explanation is too long-winded to be accurate.”

“Think what you will. My brother wants you to work with him.” James Moriarty looked as if the very thought was distasteful. “Putting your two

brains together, Mr. Holmes, is our only chance of defeating the Order of Dagon, and bringing down these murderers."

"You can't honestly believe that I would agree to this," Holmes said. "Work with your brother, who isn't brave enough to show his face here? Why? I think he wants me to do his dirty work so he can uncover the secrets behind Dagon. Where their gold comes from, and with it, all their power. He wants to know how they kill people with no trace, no footprints, no evidence left behind. He wants to know the secrets behind their crimes.

"If I outwit Dagon," he continued, "Moriarty can get back to business and rebuild his criminal empire. He can assume control of the Order of Dagon, all of its men, and all of its wealth. You've told me this yourself, sir."

Neither relented. During their lengthy exchange, it became evident to me —but I am biased—that Holmes was intellectually superior to Moriarty's brother. I had initially thought that this man might be the Professor himself, but his arguments were so muddled that the true identity of Moriarty remained an enigma to me.

Finally, the man's frustration got the better of him.

"I tell you, Holmes, this is something unknown to mankind!" he said loudly. "They are dangerous beyond our ken. Maybe these are demons from hell, I don't know."

"There is no such thing," Holmes muttered, cracking a smile, then immediately withdrawing it. "Now go back to your brother and tell him that he disappoints me. He lacks nerve."

"You will work with him?"

Holmes shrugged. Finally, he relented and and nodded slightly.

"Perhaps," he said, "but only under the condition that no harm comes again to Dr. Watson's family. Your brother must give me his word."

"I give you his word. It is done. We will leave Dr. Watson's family alone." With that he retrieved his coat and hat, donned them, and departed.

"Good God, Holmes," I said, as soon as he was gone. "How can you even consider collaborating with such evil men?" But my friend just gave a wave of his hand.

"Let Moriarty think we're working together. It's safer that way," he said. "In the meantime, we have a machine to tame, and an opera to attend."

Chemistry.

Norma.

Moriarty.
Life with Sherlock Holmes was never dull.

33

KHAN’ALOA KHU TU TANGH’AROA XII

Innsmouth, Massachusetts

Beneath the moon, the wet cobblestones gleamed like black pearls. The water soothed my webbed feet and flushed into my pores, the salt energizing me, making me more alert.

“*Moa, moa, moa*,” they muttered. “*Mau fetia, tuane, mau fetia, tuahine*.” Sacred, sacred, sacred. The stars, brother of mine, the stars, sister of mine. We spoke only in the sacred language brought forth by Obed Marsh from our ancestors in the South Seas. Dagon and Hydra, *metua tane*, *metua vahine*—our forebears, parents of our parents’ parents’ parents.

The trees bent at their waists and arched over me, and out of respect, their branches brushed my shoulders. *E rau rarahi*, even the largest trees bowed to me.

Behind them, the buildings of Innsmouth, constructed by humans, had twisted over the decades. They, too, bent at their waists in deference to me. As I sloshed over the black pearls, the roofs dipped lower, the windows cracked a little more. The rotting wood splintered, and fell, while the doors creaked and groaned. The buildings jerked toward each other and away from each other, forming a jigsaw of wood and stone arching into the night sky, set against the moonglow and the stars.

Mau fetia, the stars.

As I slopped nearer the beach, the roofs became even more angled, sloping deeply toward me, their outlines hazy and melting into the backdrop of low-slung clouds. Floorboards shook. Cats cried. Animals howled. People awakened and shivered in their beds.

Only those of the Deep, those of the Order of Dagon, followed me. The rest of them, those who were born tainted, those who smelled but faintly of the fish, remained locked in their houses, stupidly thinking they could avoid the inevitable. *E taoto ratou*, let them sleep. Soon, the fish hook *pafao* would snag them and drag them out to sea.

My toes spread across the sand. I tilted back on my heels, and surveyed the domain of Great Dagon.

I have fulfilled your requirements, Oh Great One, repeatedly. I have fulfilled them over the years, as have my children and their children. We live to serve you and for nothing else. Our allegiance has no bounds.

The sand was wet, the tide high. I waded into the cold, my pores sucking up salt until my head swam and my limbs weakened. The salt was especially potent tonight. The moon swung down and gazed at me. The clouds parted, and the stars drizzled light.

My hair streamed over my shoulders. I held the golden sickle, my long fingers spiraling around its staff.

"Arrange the mistletoe," I said solemnly, then stood still as several females, the ripest among the breeders, threaded my long hair with plants—not only the mistletoe, a green gloss with white jots, but also the seaweed strands, rank with fish.

Fingers jostled me and I lashed out, my sickle striking the offender's forehead. Blood gleamed in moonlight, the girl fell back. I struck again. The gold hook lodged in her skull, and I wrenched it free, smeared her blood off the sickle and onto the sand.

The others shrank away from me, cowering and hiding their faces. But they knew.

Anyone who touches me dies, for I am sacred to the ocean, to Devil Reef, to the Deep Ones who come from the stars, the moon, the sea, and all the deadly dimensions of this earth and beyond.

A tremble rose as we squelched—webbed feet with toe suckers—together toward the sea. Fanning around me, my followers formed patterns within patterns, and they sang the tunes passed through the generations. Music by Obed Marsh and the Deep Ones, lyrics by Khan'aloa Khu Tu Tangh'aroa I, my Tahitian forebear.

"Dagon cometh, his red temples
Bear the crowns of mistletoe and gold;
From moonbeams his essence gathers
And strikes the water;
His red star in its orbit flames
And the fish shiver
And they shed their scales

And they walk on land as men
Into the bosom of Innsmouth.”

The males grew quiet. All were naked. All had the green skin, the bulging eyes, the gills of Deep Ones, but still the human form.

The females were more exotic, with luminescent scales of many colors, shimmering filaments that fluttered at their sides, fin ruffles in shades found nowhere else on earth, lidless eyes protruding on stalks.

I was the most evolved, strongest in the water as well as on land. My toe suckers pressed hard into the sand, then released the grains, sending me forward several feet at a time. My finger suckers easily found food hiding in rock crevasses on the ocean floor or deep within the sand. I’d passed my seed to more than a hundred offspring, and I’d bred with the purest females.

My line would continue and become more potent with passing generations. We would spread over the earth. We would break the barrier. We would bring back Dagon, the Deep Ones, and Cthulhu as masters over all. Potency and breeding: the key.

Draped in seaweed, the females warbled and screeched another song, this one twisted—no, *wrenched!*—from the Italian Vincenzo Bellini, and lo, by Dagon Himself.

“*Ebb’yuh dissoth’nknpflknghreet!*”

They fluttered around me, voices straining to reach the high notes—

“*Yog’fuhrsothothothoth ’a’a’a’memerutupao’omii!*”

—and they clattered their outer scales and shells. The song reminded me of ‘Casta Diva,’ the great soprano aria in Bellini’s *Norma*, my favorite opera. While I didn’t understand the Italian words or the music, I did understand— *thoroughly and to the roots of my soul*—Dagon’s version.

Hallowed by parent presence,
He with a fish *raos* whose head is large
Let its rotting essence
Quell all else
As below, so here prevail.

Inina, with her superb voice, hit the highest note and held it, and had I been able to cry in the human way, tears of joy would have sprung to my

eyes. My heart lifted, but my lidless eyes and scaled face betrayed no emotion.

The Cave of Puhiairoto faced the open sea and the Devil Reef. I left my followers on the beach, and alone I squelched into the sacred priestly realm. The water crashed to the rocks yards away. Waves broke and sprayed, slammed into Puhiairoto, drenched me, then slinked back to open sea.

In the taiaro, *the waves between the rocks and* Puhiairoto, *we protect our young. Farther out, in* aauhaoaoa demoni, *Devil Reef, we breed and sacrifice ourselves to you. In* taiotua, *the outer sea, we join you forever*.

My people chanted.

"*Aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni…*"

I squatted on the black pearls of Puhiairoto. Sea eggs, spawn, soon to hatch and release wonders upon the world. The pearls were slimy. I dug my toe suckers into the mounds, swayed on bent legs, lifted my arms to the sea.

And my people chanted.

"*Aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni…*"

I drifted into the music, a chorus of high-pitched squeals, baritones, bellows, and melodic keening. There was no sound on earth like the beautiful chorus of Puhiairoto. Its only rival was Bellini's *Norma*, which was a distant echo.

Tremors ran through me. An ache swept from my suckers up my legs and into my torso, and from there flamed into a deep burn that penetrated my brain and blotted out all but the intonations I knew so well. Despite the pain, the searing burn, the sweat, the slime, I kept my arms stretched to the sea, my focus on the chant which thrummed through me, pounding louder and louder.

"*Aauhaoaoa DEMONI aauhaoaoa DEMONI aauhaoaoa DEMONI…*"

My eye stalks swiveled up and I beheld the ceiling of the cave, dotted in black eggs, clusters hanging like black grapes, ready to fall and split open and release the true swarms.

Inina slunk into the cave and squatted beside me. Gills fluttering open and closed, open and closed, unblinking eyes multifaceted and glowing on thousands of polygonal surfaces, glowing with the burn of *aauhaoaoa demoni*. She set her young, a squirming worm, next to the black sand lip of *taiaro*.

"*Inina hiti.*"

Inina's deformed infant, the monster, would die. It wriggled up the sand toward her, then shrieked as only the young shriek, loud, insistent, and shrill. She turned her back to it and faced the cave wall. Her gills fluttered, open and closed, open and closed.

The writhing monster, a long thing, *e mea maoro*; and *e mea iti haihai roa*, so exceedingly small.

Inina was mother to ten of my young, all perfect, all ready to follow Dagon into the Deep, but this one—this monster—remained nameless and would die as if never born. Its siblings warbled the death chant on the beach outside the cave. Dagon's will be done. The monster served a greater purpose. The monster was special. Its siblings were jealous.

I prodded it with my toe, and it flipped over and into a wave, where it rode briefly on the crest and disappeared into the black sea. The undertow swept it to the rock, where it flew into water spray, writhing beneath the moon, only to sink again into the crash of waves beyond.

Rest well, young one, in the reef, where you belong. Rest and be consumed by the Great Ones, the Deep, the Vast Beyond. Rest well.

My lover, Inina, bowed to me and slithered backward toward the black sand, where her infant had writhed only moments before. Her scales dulled, her glow dead, her strength spent. *Like avititaapiha*, I thought, an old fish hook worn down, rusty, and tossed aside. Her tail flipped up and caught the moonlight, and she dove beneath the white froth pounding over the rocks.

"*Ufatu maehha faeatai tuatta iu iu rahi roa cthulhu rahi atu daghon da'agon f'hthul'rahi roa. Ma'a marae himene poerava moana moana*."

Black eggs fell from the ceiling and broke on my head. The mush of the spawn dripped down my face, into my eyes, and between my rubbery lips. The ceiling cracked, and the crowd outside gasped, and for a moment, ceased chanting. Slowly, the chant swelled again, but now, another crack—like thunder—broke over me, and the chant dipped back down.

Crack after crack, the swelling and dipping of the chant! I broke into a fever, first hot all over, and then cold, and the sweat poured from me into a fishy soup over the black eggs upon which I squatted. *My great and mighty breeding soup sprayeth over your eggs, Oh Master Dagon! I breed with the eels for you!*

Fine breeding of twins, swarms of twins from our loins like the birth of a thousand fish, tossed as sacrifice into the big fire. We offer food for you in the ancient temple, where we sing amongst the black pearls of the ocean.

Give me *puhiairoto*, the giant eels of *aauhaoaoa demoni*.

Give me, give me, give me…

Do not withhold!

Above me, the eggs fell and broke upon my head, and the ceiling cracked like mighty thunder. The cave rumbled. It quaked. Outside, the people screamed.

"*Aauhaoaoa DEMONI aauhaoaoa DEMONI aauhaoaoa DEMONI!*"

The bolts of *puhiairoto* drowned out their voices. They threw themselves into the sea to join Dagon at the Devil Reef. Soon, I would join them, and we would swim in glory beneath the ocean and to the Deep, where we would spawn the Perfect until we died. For this was our destiny, those of us proud and strong enough to serve in the Order of Dagon.

I could no longer keep my balance, and I collapsed in a swoon. Lay, panting, in the cracked egg mess, in my own fish soup mess, and around me squirmed the little ones, the black eels of Puhiairoto Cave. Their eyes glowed, red within black within red within black, infinite dimensions, surface upon surface.

Eyes, infinite eyes…

34

DR. JOHN WATSON

THE WESTERN GAZETTE

November 20, 1890

AVEBURY—Angry villagers attempted to set fire to Kristoffer Beiler's barn yesterday. Beiler, rumored to be in his teens, was not at home and could not be located. The barn did not react to the flames and remains standing. No explanation could be given.

The recent death of patriarch Amos Beiler sparked renewed speculations about the nature of the objects constructed by the family. Local citizens have been demanding the shutdown of the Beiler operation since last week's death of 98-year-old Elwood Jantson.

Local shop owner Jake Calloway claimed that "Jantson was in perfect health, even at 98. He sat in a Beiler chair at the Foxy Pub, and I swear it was the deadly dimension of that chair that killed the man. I swear it was. We all saw it." His account was confirmed by at least a dozen witnesses.

Throughout the region, Beiler furniture is considered as finely crafted as anything found elsewhere in the world, and draws wealthy buyers, but the Beiler family has been scorned for generations as being odd and dangerously eccentric.

LONDON DAILY NEWS

Thursday, November 20, 1890

LONDON—Scotland Yard yesterday assisted London police in an unsuccessful shutdown of the East End tram that has killed more than a dozen people. Police have been guarding the tram machine building twenty-four hours a day, to stop intruders as well as innocents who might wander by and meet their deaths. Readers might recall that earlier attempts by the police to shut down or destroy this machine resulted in the deaths of two officers, with eight others narrowly escaping with their lives.

Local residents claim that the machine is considered as lethal as any murderer, including the Ripper.

Under the guidance of Scotland Yard's Inspector Lestrade, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade was brought in to soak the works with water, with the intent of quenching the internal fires and shutting down the process. Repeated attempts at hosing the device yielded no results, and the machine has continued to function uninterrupted.

One officer collapsed when a blast of steam hit him. Another suffered steam inhalation. Several pipes fell and struck four officers. All injured are being treated…

*

Sensationalism sells. That the beast could be "considered as lethal as any murderer" was hyperbole and inflammatory. Such statements would serve to make the people of London more hysterical, create public outcries against Scotland Yard, perhaps even induce violence from mobs.

It would yield a field day for career criminals such as Moriarty.

*

LONDON EVENING STANDARD

Thursday, November 20, 1890

EAST END TRAM SENT BY THE DEVIL!

LONDON—The East End tram machine that malfunctioned and killed dozens of people is still running. Residents near the machine, which is located on Thrawl Street, live in terror of what they claim to be the incarnation of the devil.

Several residents have built elaborate shrines in their homes to ward off evil spirits. Children remain inside. Men refuse to leave their families and go to work. At night, families huddle together, afraid of "street demons" they think consume people whole, spitting out their bones.

Many people have returned to church after decades of atheist or secular behavior.

Even Scotland Yard is unable to turn off the deadly machine, which residents insist has also murdered a young woman in the area. An attempt to put the machine out of action by flooding the building on Thrawl Street resulted in the deaths of several police officers. Pressed to set fire to the machine and the building that houses it, Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard has expressed an unwillingness to do so.

"Such a fire would set ablaze the entire street and all the houses nearby," he explained before a group of citizens.

*

I could only imagine Holmes's reaction to these newspaper accounts. Demons, devils, entities, shrines. It was not only Willie Jacobs who thought the beast was alive. Now the entire city thought it alive, thanks to the handling of publicity by Inspector Lestrade.

What next, I wondered?

*

MORNING POST

Thursday, November 20, 1890

LONDON—Mr. Sherlock Holmes remains baffled by the murder of Theodore Jacobs. When questioned, however, he refused to lend credence to the idea that the tram machine is a living entity, a devil, a demon, or anything supernatural.

"The construct is *just* a machine," he stated emphatically. "It is constructed of metal, and there is a way to shut it down, or at least, minimize its impact."

He refused to elaborate upon the process he would propose for switching off the device in order that it might be dismantled without further harm to citizens.

*

So Holmes knew about the hysteria and already responded publicly via the *Morning Post*. Good for him, holding to principle and logic. Certainly this case was among the most difficult that Holmes had ever confronted.

It didn't help that I'd been suffering from an ailment that even I couldn't identify. It affected my mind, which felt as if I'd imbibed too much. My

thoughts were fuzzy, muddled at times. Sometimes, my eyes saw colors that might not actually have been there. What was in front of me seemed split into tiny particles of color—a fuzz, a blur, like a George Seurat painting.

I'd not mentioned my malady to Holmes out of fear that he would not let me see the case to conclusion.

In addition, a profound ache and sadness consumed me. I missed Mary and Samuel, and wished that they would come home. Lestrade had many of his best men looking for her, yet I still feared the worst.

It seemed apparent that Moriarty was not behind her disappearance, and even with my odd illness, I could not bring myself to believe that a machine was behind whatever had happened to my family. Someone or some*thing* else was at play.

For the moment I waited and prayed for the best.

35

“The rates are higher now. Peak of the season.”

“Come now, Mrs. Hinds,” Holmes said without the hint of a smile. “Nobody’s visiting from out of town. The Loggerheads has plenty of rooms.”

She smacked her gums and eyed us. Her cane tapped the floorboards with the steadiness of a woodpecker. It was a marvel that her spindly legs supported her hunched body, which appeared bulky beneath the ratty sweater.

“You are right,” she said finally, flashing my friend a toothless smile. “Nobody is coming to the Loggerheads, what with the Beiler demons and all. You can have your old room for the same price.”

She led us back to the room where we’d examined Amos Beiler’s intestines with utensils from her kitchen. As before, I tossed my muddy shoes by the door, and then cautiously made my way over the warped floor that sloped toward the room’s center. Holmes perched on his cot and surveyed the wallpaper that was sketched with flowers of the dark ages.

As I began to settle on scratchy cloth that served as my blanket, he waved me aside, and I barely had time to duck before he dove at the wallpaper over my cot and yanked it off. The peeling paper easily fell in one large sheet of roughly two by three feet, and along with it came the black-mold powder that once had been wood. I sneezed, and my eyes watered. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and stood by the door, where the air was clearer, if one could call it clear by any standards.

Holmes flipped over the wallpaper and tacked it backward on the wall using pins procured from his bag. He pulled out a few other items, as well —a quill pen, a small blotter, and a vial of ink.

“What are you doing,” I asked, “other than trying to suffocate me?”

“A little soot is nothing, Watson, compared to the slaughter we oppose.” He inked a chart onto the back of the molding wallpaper, labeling the first column *Dead/Attacks*. Other columns followed: *Drawings*, *Sphere*, *Stacks*, *Gold*, *Phosphorus*, *Lead*, *Dagonite Auctoritatem*, *Code*, *Octopus/Fish Motif*, and *Order of Dagon*.

“We have some time before the first public showing of *Norma* tonight,” he said. “I fear something terrible will occur during the opera and want to

eliminate as many distractions as I can."

"What do you mean by distractions?" I asked.

"Deaths and crimes peripheral to the central murders." He answered curtly, and I knew his mind was racing as he focused on the chart and started inking information onto it. As he did, I gathered my notebook and writing instruments from my overnight case and began transcribing the chart.

"I believe the events in Swallowhead Spring will be most elucidating, Watson," he began. "Fitzgerald's excitement about *Norma* goes far beyond that of even the most obsessed opera aficionado."

"Perhaps he's enticed Adelina Patti to perform. Giuseppe Verdi claimed —what, ten or fifteen years?—that Patti is possibly the best soprano of our time. *Bel canto coloraturo*, beautiful!"

"Are you done with the opera lesson, Watson?" Holmes looked annoyed. His lips pressed tightly together, and he frowned. "Perhaps we might continue with the matter at hand."

"Yes, yes," I muttered. "Please do proceed. Sorry, old man." I frowned and added, "I've not been myself lately."

"So I've noticed," he replied with less of an edge. "What's ailing you? Do you know?" I shook my head, and when he looked downcast, quickly changed the subject.

"Let's get to it, Holmes. Three people died in the alley by the tram machine, as I recall, along with Theodore Jacobs in the building itself." He instantly brightened, his eyes glowing, his mind back on the hunt. He held the quill in one hand, a jar of ink in the other.

"Yes. Let me note the ancient drawings of the machine with its idiosyncratic dimensions and geometry." His quill scribbled. "Also, the bone sphere with a bizarre symbol etched inside it, the weird stacks of bones, plus the gold, phosphorus, and lead."

"Don't forget the numbers that open the door," I added, and he wrote that down, too.

"Then we encountered Amos Beiler's murder in his barn. Again, the evidence included ancient drawings of the furniture with its truly bizarre dimensions and geometries, the bone sphere with an etched symbol inside it, the weird stacks of bones, and the bone fragments that we can't identify. No gold. No phosphorus. No lead.

“When we examined Amos Beiler’s remains, we found blood cells with large center structures not found in humans or any known animals,” he added. “I believe that to be important. Some of the cells were shaped like trapezoids, hexagons, triangles, and distorted versions of dodecahedrons and icosahedrons. We also found that ice bug, which is not native to England, but rather, to glacial environments—perhaps Antarctica. There was a hair unlike any animal hair known to science, and it was inside Beiler’s intestines. And let us not forget the bizarre stain on his bone, the one imprinted with heptagons and shapes we couldn’t identify. And adding to all of this peculiar evidence, Beiler possessed a *Dagonite Auctoritatem*, and inside that dangerous book—”

My hands tingled, or I imagined that they tingled, just at the mention of the book that had required special gloves.

“Reference to the door numbers,” I said.

“Yes.” Holmes continued to scribble on his graph. The wallpaper wasn’t cooperating, and the dry paper threatened to crumble beneath Holmes’s quill.

“What else?” he mused, pen held aloft. “Then we found that giant frog creature, dead along with his mates, in the French tunnels. Lestrade received ancient drawings of the tunnels from the French police. We found the bone sphere with another odd symbol etched inside of it—”

“—and a number of the weird bone stacks,” I added, “some human, some unidentifiable. But again, no gold, no phosphorus, and no lead. Oh, and Holmes, don’t forget the octopus-frog motif. In Blois, it was most evident, I’d say.”

Holmes lightly inked something on his chart, stood back as dust crumbled. He stared at the chart.

“Were there any other murders that counted as truly bizarre?” After a moment, he scribbled again while telling me, “Moriarty’s brother spoke of sacrificial murders, and there was also a body found along the coast. Then there was Lord Wiltshram, clearly involved with the Order of Dagon. The numbers that opened the drawer in his Beiler table, the one that Fitzgerald expected to hold the gold he’d given Wiltshram for reasons unknown, were the same as the door numbers, but alas, his murder did not involve the strange bone spheres, the weird stacks of bones—his bones were stacked by a human being, and were bloody with meat still on them. No phosphorus, no lead.” He turned to look at me.

“I concluded some time ago that a thief killed Wiltshram, and certainly for the gold in that drawer. We don’t know the identity of the thief. He may be connected to the other murder, to this Order of Dagon, or on the other hand, he may be a common criminal.”

“How many people belong to this Order of Dagon, as far as we know?” I asked, and then tried to answer my own question. “Professor Henry Fitzgerald is at the top of the list. We know he’s involved with the murders. He thinks of himself as a Druid, doesn’t he?”

“Perhaps,” Holmes said thoughtfully, “but perhaps not. The connection to Druidic-style worship may be a ruse to throw us off. He may not believe in pagan mythology any more than I do.”

We discussed Lady Ashberton, who was too weak to murder anyone, though she had admitted in our own hearing that she was part of this gang, the Order of Dagon. Lord Ashberton, on the other hand, was near-insane and could very well be our killer, along with Fitzgerald. His palatial estate was a shrine to Dagon, with the octopus-frog-fish motif everywhere from his door knockers to statues to rugs to paintings to furniture.

Pontose, Wiltshram’s butler, could be ruled out as a suspect for the killings. He was terrified of Fitzgerald and Ashberton, and while he’d left town quickly after his master’s murder, Holmes and I had no reason to believe the butler was anything other than an innocent bystander, or at worst a passive observer, in the matter of the Order of Dagon.

Willie Jacobs and Kristoffer Beiler were also innocent bystanders who had suffered when their fathers were murdered.

Then there were Mary and Samuel. The mysterious Moriarty had briefly placed them in danger, and the man I’d *killed*—I still shuddered to think of it—claimed he’d been sent by someone to gas my family. And now Mary had disappeared. While this caused me pain, I had to agree with Holmes that these events were peripheral at most and not pertinent to the murders of Theodore Jacobs and Amos Beiler.

“I still can’t explain the murders of Jacobs, Beiler, and the French men in the tunnels,” he said. “Nor do I believe that Moriarty sent that man to gas Mary and Samuel. Moriarty may have tricked Mary and Samuel into going to the market, but that was to throw us off the case. Later, when he realized that he was losing control of his criminal enterprise to the Order of Dagon and, I believe, to Fitzgerald, Moriarty begged me to help him stop the Order. He wouldn’t have tried to gas your family, not as a threat, not with

intent to kill. No. That man in your home, Watson, was sent by someone else."

"Fitzgerald?" I offered. Holmes answered by sucking in his breath and issuing a guttural noise.

"I believe so, yes," he said. "Fitzgerald wanted us to think that Moriarty was behind the death of the girl in the East End—murdered, but without any of the evidence and odd clues found at the Jacobs, Beiler, and Blois murder scenes.

"Consider, if you will, that for Moriarty to send his brother—should we believe that the man actually is Moriarty's *brother*—to consult with me, he must feel *desperate*. What's more, Fitzgerald must be fully aware of Moriarty's existence, of his vast criminal network. As Professor Moriarty wants me to help him eliminate the Order of Dagon, so Fitzgerald wants me to help him eliminate Moriarty." He looked disgusted, and I knew he hated being thought of as a fool.

"But why did Fitzgerald take me in after the tram explosion?" I asked. "Why did he speak with us concerning the bizarre murders rampant in other parts of England? Would he not have preferred that we remain ignorant?"

"Ah, that," Holmes chuckled. "He's intelligent, this Fitzgerald. At the time, he was curious to discover if we knew anything about him and his gang. He wanted information. He wanted to make us think that he was on our side."

I nodded. It made sense.

We concluded with dismissal of the tram explosion and the deaths that had shaken me so thoroughly.

"Equipment malfunctions," Holmes said.

"Operator errors," I added, thinking myself clever for devising such a modern turn of phrase. "If Willie Jacobs had not tinkered with the beast, perhaps it would not have malfunctioned that day."

"Possibly, though we must remember that the machine lashed out at us, Watson, and killed several policemen who attempted to disassemble it."

"Surely you can't believe the machine is alive, as Willie Jacobs claims?" I said, one eyebrow raised.

"No, no, not at all," Holmes said quickly. "Machines are not living creatures. They don't think for themselves. But Watson, perhaps they can be created in a way that makes them do certain things under particular conditions. For example, if you strike such a machine in a specific location,

perhaps another component moves in response—forcefully enough to cause harm. Might that not be possible?”

I had to agree that it was. “After all, look at the human body,” I said. “After certain injuries to the brain, the body might still move, walk, and eat, but the mouth might not speak, the eyes might not see. Twitch or tweak one component—cure one illness, let us say—and you risk causing another to flare up. Yes, perhaps machines could be built to react in this way, as well.”

Yet none of this explained how the machine grew pipes and cables. None of this explained the spheres, the stacks of bones, the gold, phosphorus, lead, the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*, the ancient drawings.

“I’m afraid that I’m as baffled as ever,” I told Holmes. Someone rapped on the door, the blows sharp as if delivered by a wooden object. A brittle voice called out.

“It’s time, Mr. Holmes.”

36

The carriage dropped us off near West Kennet Long Barrow. In the distance to our right, the tip of Silbury Hill pricked the granite sky. A mist drifted around the peak. To our left, tattoos splotched the soggy grass, black on brown on dying weed. A slink of sun illuminated the horizon.

“Come, Watson,” Holmes said. “I want to see the Neolithic chambers before we proceed to Swallowhead Spring. It’s a short walk through this field and to the top of the incline. From the barrow, we can walk toward the road in the other direction and reach the spring in little time. I prefer to approach Fitzgerald’s *Norma* from the field rather than from the road with everyone else.”

He adjusted his cap and tattered plaid coat. We’d disguised ourselves in a similar manner to our former personas as tramps in need of work. We’d made sure to look sufficiently different, however, so nobody would recognize us from our visit to Fitzgerald’s estate. I had a mustache and beard, both gray and unkempt, and wore spectacles and a wig that made me look bald except for some gray hairs straggling to my shoulders. A cap covered part of the bald spot, mainly in hope of concealing as much of my visage as possible.

Holmes’s complexion was rouged, as if he were a heavy drinker. His wig was black but graying, a bowl cut that hung to his ears and covered his forehead. He’d applied a lumpy nose with his theatrical makeup. Our attire would allow us to fade into any work-worn crowd.

“I have another motive for seeking out the barrow,” Holmes said, as we trudged through wet brush up the slope toward the horizon. The treeline drooped away on our left, already dormant for the winter. A breeze jostled the branches, unleashing brown leaves that whirled to the ground, where they would disintegrate into winter mush. Life and death, the endless cycle. Around us, branches crackled, squirrels cawed like crows, and animals skittered into denser brush.

I hoped the breeze wouldn’t escalate into wind and ruin the evening’s performance of *Norma*.

“Let me guess,” I said. “It has to do with what Fitzgerald’s cook told us, eh? As I recall it, for thousands of years, Druids have buried their dead in the barrow, which supposedly is a place where earth energies merge with

the supernatural." I suppressed a chuckle. "The *Others*— whoever they are —live beneath the earth along the fertility lines that intersect here."

"Indeed, this is a place of death." Holmes pointed to the stone cave entrance in front of us. Sod and weeds covered the actual cave, which sloped beneath the ground. "And we are investigating death inflicted by men who claim to be modern-day Druids. Of note, Watson, is the ancient Chinese philosophy about the earth's currents, its symmetries and balance."

I ducked into the narrow corridor leading into West Kennet Long Barrow, and he followed me. Immediately, a quiet descended, and cold gripped me. It was dark here, and dank. Holmes and I groped our way down the tunnel. After a time, he lit a candle.

"The ancient Chinese believed in *lung mei*, or dragon's breath," he explained. "These were similar in concept to Lady Ashberton's energy and fertility lines and also to the description provided by Fitzgerald's cook. One Chinese current was considered female, the other male. The ancients built temples and tombs where the earth and sky were balanced, where the lung mei—as a corollary, we might call them *dragon lines*—were in harmony. Female, male, currents, and fertility, Watson—"

It suddenly hit me.

I stopped short and turned.

"Of course!" I said. "Fitzgerald, Ashberton, and the rest of these lunatics are in the Order of *Dagon*. *Dagon* lines. *Dragon* lines. Both Ashberton and Wiltshram's family crests are of Dagon. They think these *Dagon* lines are sacred places where the Others dwell, and where they need to hold their rituals. As the ancient Chinese had what you're thinking of as dragon lines, the Order of Dagon has its Dagon lines."

"That's what I think, yes," Holmes said, pushing me gently, and we both moved forward again. "Many ancient civilizations believed in the forces of nature and its energy. But these people of Dagon… they hold these ancient beliefs in modern times."

We entered a small cave, dark but for the candle and a gray light drifting between the rock cracks, meandering like fog over a skull-shaped rock along the back wall. It was yet colder in here. The deeper we went into the earth, the more chilled the air, the more dank.

The cave reeked, bringing to mind rotting flesh and blood. The bones from thousands of years had long ago been removed from these outer tombs, and yet, I smelled a corpse.

Then I saw it—the dead man, or what was left of him. He'd been rotting here for quite a while. His head had been raggedly sliced from his neck and lay several feet away from the skull rock. His body had been stripped from the waist down, and his killer—or killers—had brutalized him with knives…

I had to turn away. I tried not to gag.

Holmes fared no better. He also turned away, but then controlled his nerves, stooped, and stared as closely at the body as he could. It was hard to see details in the gloom.

"I don't think spirits and Dagon energy lines killed this man," he said.

Indeed, the perpetrator had been meticulous and cruel. He'd been human.

"Fitzgerald?" I said. "Could he have done it?"

"Possible, but I doubt he kills anyone with his own hands. If he's responsible for this man's death, he issued the orders, but left the job to those in his employ."

"Members of the Order of Dagon?"

"If Fitzgerald is behind this, then yes."

"Unfortunately, that means it could have been anyone, Holmes. We can't pin it on Fitzgerald or the cult."

"There have been too many murders in Avebury in too short a period, dear fellow. The Avebury murders must be connected somehow. My guess is that Fitzgerald and Ashberton must have wanted this man dead. But shall we leave this particular murder to the local police? I'll send notice following the production Fitzgerald is holding."

"Yes, let's leave it to the local police. It's almost time for *Norma*," I said, pulling out my watch and peering at it in the dancing shadows. Truth be told, I couldn't handle the stink of rotting meat in such an enclosed space. I assumed maggots must be crawling all over the man's flesh—I couldn't see clearly enough to know. I wanted to get out of the barrow and breathe fresh air.

Likely sensing my discomfort, Holmes suggested we proceed to Swallowhead Spring. We departed quickly, and as we emerged, we both drank deeply of the chilled air. The breeze had picked up, and green filaments coated with white globules swung from the moss-encrusted branches.

I dabbed at a globule. It was sticky.

“Mistletoe,” Holmes explained, circling around me, hands in his pockets and head down against the wind. “*Viscum album*. The berries are white and sticky, hence *viscum*, as in viscous, and *album*, ‘white.’ Apparently, some of the berries have already broken forth.”

I wiped my hand on my trousers and we continued onward. I thought it odd that, the closer we got to the sacred site of Swallowhead Spring, the more abundant the mistletoe became. It was ripe, moist, bursting with fertility.

“Perhaps the ancient Druids planted much mistletoe, which still flourishes here today,” Holmes suggested, as if reading my thoughts. “It may just be an oddity of nature.”

Like the deadly dimensions of the Beiler constructs and the Jacobs tram machine, I thought. *Like the deadly dimensions of the Blois caverns and tunnels*. Odd, yet deadly. Why was nature behaving in such a way? This was the puzzle.

Scientists discovered new things all the time. These new things seemed odd at first, to most people. But over time, the newness wore off and became known and old and ordinary.

“Mistletoe is a parasite, killing its host,” Holmes continued, “and it also grows along the Dorset coast down south and, of course, here in Avebury.

“Do you see that bird?” He pointed to one the color of grayish miasma. Roughly the size of a warbler, the top of its head was black—almost invisible in the gloom. In its beak, it held a white globule. “That’s a Eurasian blackcap, male. I’ve rarely seen one. The mistletoe here must be more abundant than normal. It is truly… curious.”

“Perhaps this explains the trays of mistletoe we’ve seen in the homes of the members of the Order of Dagon.”

“Mistletoe is a sacred accoutrement for modern-day Druids. They link it to enhancing their ability to have children. You might be right, Watson.” We pushed aside tall weedy growths that Holmes identified as *Apium nodiflorum, or “Fool’s Watercress.”*

“It’s related to celery,” he told me, “with small white flowers when the weather permits. *Apium nodiflorum* flourishes near Swallowhead Spring, though it is odd to see such abundance this time of year.” He paused. When he spoke again, his voice was deep and hoarse, and I knew he was shifting into his role as an aging workman. “We are close,” he said gruffly. “Prepare yourself.”

We stepped across several large, somewhat flat stones that formed a walkway. The mistletoe dripped over the shrubbery, some clumps almost as wide as I am tall. Dead trees sank beneath the weight of the growth, with nests empty of birds due to the impending winter.

“Mistletoe plays a central role in *Norma* when the high priestess cuts it from the sacred oak during the winter solstice,” Holmes said. “She typically uses a golden sickle.”

“‘Casta Diva,’” I said softly, “the key aria in *Norma*. Few sopranos sing it to perfection. When the virgins gather around Norma and she pauses, readying herself to sing ‘Casta Diva,’ you can almost hear the crowd stop breathing in the theater. Dead silence, so intense is the yearning to hear a perfect performance.”

We both shuffled forward and swatted our way through a thicket of evergreens clenched in mistletoe. Branches swiped at my face, cut me, pulled at my cap and wig. Pine needles scraped my cheeks. Beneath my shoes, twigs tinder-dry with the oncoming winter crackled as if a match had been flung upon them in the fireplace. Under the crust of tree litter, the soggy earth sank with each step.

I wondered what would happen in Fitzgerald’s version of *Norma* when the soprano cut down the mistletoe. My imagination ran wild.

Who would die? Would someone be murdered before our eyes? Would a bone sphere fall from the sky? Who, or what, would stack the bones in those weird angles, and from where would the non-human bones come?

Would gold crash down from the clouds?

The trees cloistered me. Branches arched, time stretched, water congealed in the clouds. Black boulders hung in the sky, pressing down, pressing weightlessly.

I stepped from one stone to the next, my foot slipping on wetness, my bad leg cramping and threatening to collapse beneath me. Black mist obscured the ground. I reached the end of the stone path, stepped on a log, and it groaned.

Up ahead, Holmes squeezed through another thicket, and I followed. A buzz of voices rose like crickets in early evening, growing louder as we neared Swallowhead Spring. The words were a smear of incomprehensible vowels uttered in long whines and wheezes, the consonants uttered as scritches and screeches. I whacked aside the last of the branches, and there they were, the followers of Dagon.

I gasped.

37

Dark mist swirled around them, giving the figures a sort of *energy*, as if they were formed from patterns and abstract symbols that ultimately resolved into pseudo-realistic images of human beings. They barely looked real. Perhaps faces that weren't really faces, perhaps multiple limbs, *perhaps*…

Holmes turned to face me, and blocked my view.

"Contain yourself," he said. "We must fit in."

Immediately, he hunched over and waddled into the crowd. I tottered along, keeping my head low but grabbing looks at the people as we whisked into their midst. Up close, they were solid and real, no longer patterns of abstract pseudo-reality. It had been an illusion, a trick of my over-stimulated senses.

Yet my skin tingled. There was something about them that prickled my nerves, and I couldn't put my finger on it.

The knee-high water of Swallowhead Spring gurgled over the rocks. A fallen log stretched from one mud patch to another. Large stones, like seats, squatted in the mud, in the streams that met in front of two ancient trees.

"This is the infant river Cunnit. The land is the goddess. The Swallowhead is her womb."

I jerked my head up. A man stood before us in Dagon attire—he wore a velvet cloak with streams of numbers on its collar, a gold triangular hat; an oak staff was clasped in his hand.

The hand was webbed.

Holmes hunched lower, hiding his face.

"We are ready for the birth," he rasped. "The merging of the waters, the two rivers, the male and female—" Here, he clucked then erupted into a fit of wheezing before flapping his arms and continuing. "We are ready for Norma, she who will rage forth."

"You believe! You are faithful! You breed?" the Dagonite asked.

"Breed?" I said.

"The third law of Dagon, that of mating with a female of the Order."

For a moment, even Holmes was speechless. I didn't know if he had ever been with a woman. We'd never discussed the subject. Whenever I'd brought it up, even in the abstract, he'd deflected the question.

Yet on the hunt and in the moment, Holmes always performed his roles with precision. In this case, he did not deviate.

“Where are the females of Dagon?” he wheezed, his eyes darting through the crowd, as if to seek suitable mates.

“They will be here soon enough.” A lewd grin spread across the man’s scaly face. Suddenly there was a clang, and he turned away. The crowd grew silent. Gas lamps were lit and set the black mist aglow as if with fireflies. They also illuminated the two gnarled trees set in mud between the twin streams of gurgling water.

A man-made structure stood between the trees. Cut from huge slabs of wood, two triangular posts rose to a tangle of slats assembled in ways that made no sense. They appeared to be loose, simply piled in a giant mound over open air. Mistletoe clung to the bottom slats and draped down.

The tops of the posts spanned at least three feet across. And tapered to narrow points at the bottom, where they sank into the mud. Swirls of numbers and symbols, many of which were becoming familiar to me, ranged down the posts.

As I stared at the construction, the slats began to waver before my eyes. They flickered in and out of focus. Then the entire mound drooped and curled; and the slats fluttered in the breeze. This seemed scientifically impossible, and the entire effect was unsettling, even vertiginous.

Perhaps Moriarty’s brother had been right—that something unknown to mankind had infiltrated England. I doubted his talk about “demons from hell,” but on the other hand…

“Come,” Holmes whispered, and I huddled beside him on a large stone set in one of the streams. Around us, the followers of Dagon crouched, sat, stood, and slopped over the stones. I had to blink and look twice, then thrice, at those who “slopped,” for their limbs appeared to have no bones, their torsos lay flat across the rocks, their limbs splayed and dangling into the stream.

I had not seen such creatures earlier, when we’d first entered the sacred site. Something had been *off* about the other worshipers, but not to this degree. Thinking that it must be an illusion, I peered more carefully at them. In some instances, the illusion could be credited to broken limbs that splayed oddly over the stones. Others, however, appeared *misshapen*. As I stared, additional features came into focus.

Lidless, bulging eyes, a toothless grin, giant flapping tongue. As I gazed through the dark at the crowd, I thought one or two of them possessed strange flaps of skin on their necks, or where their ears should have been.

The crowd consisted entirely of men, some in the robes and hats of Dagon, others wearing workmen's clothes. Women were noticeably absent.

Beside me, Holmes's breathing quickened. I could only imagine what he was thinking. *What has happened to these people?* What surgical nightmares had been inflicted upon them? Why would they allow it? Religious and cultural scarification was well documented in remote tribes and societies, but not in the villages of Wiltshire.

My gaze wandered to the people nearest the strange stage. Three stood in the water, where the streams merged, though it must have been bitterly cold. One was Professor Henry Fitzgerald, decked out in full Dagon regalia. Beside him, a little girl, perhaps six to eight years old, clasped his hand. She seemed not to possess the same odd features as the other worshipers, but at this distance and in the murk I could only see her in the most vague way. The third person was Lord Ashberton, also in his Order of Dagon robe and hat.

I nudged Holmes, and he nodded.

A few men, all wearing robes and hats, sloshed through the water, carrying musical instruments—violins, violas, flutes, and several others. The entire orchestra consisted of no more than a dozen musicians.

The moon peeked between the heavy clouds, and I saw that it was full and round. White light molted down, as if feathers drifted from the clouds. Then blackness slipped again over the moon, and we were left with the vaporous glow of the gas lamps.

Lord Ashberton waded through the water to a boulder near the stage. He raised his oak staff, waved it, and the music began. It was not standard *Norma*, but rather, a mutated version of it. Certainly the notes swelled with excitement and trailed elegantly downward, but after a few measures, the tune changed and broke into a frenzied staccato.

Listening carefully, I identified the opening tune within the staccato, then suddenly, it picked up pace again, broke mid-tune, and skittered wildly up and down scales, barely sounding like *Norma* at all. Something clanged, and the music ebbed. The crowd simmered, excitement welling with the expectation that something magnificent and wondrous was about to unfold.

Two men in black robes slopped through the mud and stood beneath the *Norma* structure. One played the role of Pollione, the Roman proconsul and commander of the Legions of Gaul, while the other played the role of Flavius, his lieutenant. Their voices weren't familiar, and I sat too far away to see their faces. They sounded young and powerful, the possible opera stars of tomorrow. Today, however, their voices were immature and not developed enough to do *Norma* justice.

"Roman-occupied Gaul, 100 BC. Under the ancient oak, the Druids prepare for the ceremony of cutting the mistletoe," Holmes whispered. "But these people stand beneath Fitzgerald's structure, constructed from oak. They do not stand beneath the ancient trees that grow here naturally."

"And listen," I replied, my voice low. "They have skipped the opening scene. It's as if they intend to go straight into 'Casta Diva.'"

People squatting nearby growled at us to shut up, and we grew quiet again. On the stage, the odd tune disappeared along with the staccato. The two actors paved the way for the first appearance of Norma, the high priestess, who was supposed to be a virgin. In the opera, Norma had secretly borne two children by Pollione, who had abandoned her for her virginal assistant priestess, Adalgisa. Norma was caught between the Druids and their Roman overlords. She wished to protect her own people, yet the Roman master was her mate.

She was no longer a virgin. She had betrayed her people. As the two men sang, my mind ran through the English translation.

> And let the first appearance of Norma's virginal face be announced by three strokes upon the sacred bronze.
>
> Death lurks in this grove.
>
> The flame that once burned in my heart for Norma is now extinguished.
>
> Then a terrible shadow fell between us. The great Druidic mantle enveloped us like a cloud.
>
> Deathly horror spread soundlessly around.

Again, something clanged. Pollione and Flavio retreated into the stream, and several men and women, all in black robes, replaced them. *This must be the chorus*, I thought, *of Druids and priestesses who tend to Norma and her*

rituals. All held candles and stood to the sides of the structure, singing in harmony about Norma and "a comet, precursor of horror."

A man jostled my arm—*Fitzgerald*—and instructed a girl to sit with Lord Ashberton on the rock in front of us. He called the girl Maria.

"Ah, and here comes Lucy Ann Nolande," Lord Ashberton said, and I gasped when I heard the name. "She'll be in splendid form tonight."

"She'll be as she's supposed to be," Fitzgerald responded, his baritone voice sending shivers down my spine. I shrank back, lowering my head.

"But how *can* you?" Ashberton hissed. "She's the mother of your child."

"The flame that once burned in my heart is extinguished," Fitzgerald said. "It is Adalgisa I want now."

"Adalgisa?"

"She of the Order of Dagon. She, the virginal goddess of the Deep whom I have not yet met. She, chosen for me by the Old Ones, by Dagon Himself. She who will bear my true children. This—" he gestured at Maria, who was no more than six years old "—this child is not of Dagon, and not worthy of my name."

"But surely—" Ashberton continued.

"Quiet!" Fitzgerald commanded. "Norma comes. Death lurks in this grove."

The clang resounded three times.

And let the first appearance of Norma's virginal face be announced by three strokes upon the sacred bronze.

Lucy Ann Nolande, the soprano in the role of Norma, waded through the water, stepped into the mud, and made her way beneath Fitzgerald's structure. She was slight in build, petite, but as with the other singers, I could not see her features. She lifted the hood of her black robe and let it fall to her shoulders. In the mist, she appeared ethereal.

The mother of Fitzgerald's child. It was shocking that he *had* a child. And the mother was Lucy Ann Nolande, one of the finest sopranos of her generation. She was famous throughout Europe. Her greatest role was Norma—she was known for it. Her voice had a distinctive timbre and vibration, unlike any other soprano.

Maria, the girl, whimpered and stretched one arm toward her mother. Ashberton grabbed her wrist and brought the arm back down.

"Quiet," he whispered, "you must obey the Professor."

I thought of Samuel. I could never ignore the fact that he was my son. How cruel of Fitzgerald to renounce his own daughter. Had he ever cared for her? I doubted it. Had he ever loved Lucy Ann Nolande? I doubted it. Fitzgerald was *despicable*.

And yet, despite the love I felt for Samuel—and for Mary—perhaps *I* was despicable, as well. After all, my wife had left me and taken my son with her. She'd left no letter. Even Scotland Yard couldn't find her. She was so afraid that evil would befall Samuel—kidnapping, murder—that she had left me.

It was my own fault.

How could I judge another man when I had failed so miserably?

The moon blossomed again from behind the clouds, streaming light upon Lucy Ann Nolande, who now stood directly beneath Fitzgerald's bizarre structure. Color shimmered on the wood slats that formed the ceiling. The hanging mistletoe swayed. It danced to the music of *Norma*.

Fitzgerald and Ashberton slipped away, leaving Maria huddled alone on the rock. They disappeared into the thickets from which Holmes and I had emerged.

"Perhaps we should leave, too," I whispered, and I began to rise. A firm hand on my arm stopped me.

"Definitely not. We stay."

"But shouldn't we follow Fitzgerald?"

"No," Holmes said flatly. "We stay. I suspect he'll be watching his special *Norma* from those thickets. We must see this to conclusion. Discern why Fitzgerald constructed this bizarre structure, why he's staging *Norma* here tonight, specifically with Lucy Ann Nolande. I require hard evidence, Watson, to prove that he is our murderer. Beyond any doubt."

Settling back down, I was uneasy. Odd structures, those of deadly dimensions, led to death. Yet for the most part, Willie Jacobs's machine building remained passive, and we'd been in Kristoffer Beiler's barn and survived. Perhaps nothing would occur tonight with Fitzgerald's bizarre *Norma* structure.

My imagination had got the better of me.

And yet…

"What if it's true," I murmured to Holmes. "What if the structure starts… *killing* people?"

"We must see what happens," he insisted.

All of a sudden there was a loud *creaking*, and lightning splintered the sky. I jumped involuntarily and in that brief moment, Lucy Ann Nolande's face glowed. I saw blue eyes, hair the color of wheat, and she reminded me of Mary. I gasped.

"Steady," Holmes said beneath his breath.

I wanted my wife. I wanted my child.

I did not want to be here, in the middle of nowhere, crouching on a stone in a fetid stream, surrounded by insanity. I wanted to be home.

Lucy Ann Nolande, Norma, removed a golden sickle from beneath her robe. She held it high. The priestesses to her sides began to sing and sway.

The men in the audience quivered.

"Now," they gibbered all around us. "Now we will have the females."

Norma slashed at the mistletoe, and it dropped to the mud, sending the whole structure into spasms of motion. It rocked back and forth, heaving itself toward the audience, groaning in harmony with the chorus of priestesses.

It seemed as if it would collapse on top of them.

I did not recognize the tune. It was not from the opera. Lucy Ann Nolande shifted back and forth with the structure, keeping pace with it, her sickle high in the air, still slashing at the parasitic growth.

The chorus of priestesses fell to their knees in the mud. Nolande dropped her sickle and sang with her fine operatic voice.

"Casta Diva, che inargenti
Questa sacre antiche piante.
Fine al rito: e il sacro bosco
Sia disgombro dai profani."

Although I was not skilled sufficiently in Italian to understand, I knew the tune, and I knew the rough English translation.

These sacred ancient plants.
Complete the rite,
And the sacred wood be cleansed of the profane.

The oak structure spasmed again, then settled into a steady quiver. Light trembled on it, *through* it. Colors sparked on the spirals snaking their way up the posts. The tangle of wood slats over Norma bulged toward the sky. They arched upward, then sagged as if filled with a heavy weight. White berry ooze glistened on the mistletoe and dripped into Nolande's hair.

"Holmes, we must leave!" I cried.

He glared at me, gesturing at me to be silent.

All eyes were focused upon Norma, the priestesses—*the females,* as the crowd hissed—and upon the oak structure. I fell silent, but I desperately wanted to escape from Swallowhead Spring, from these Druids—or whatever they were—and from *Norma*. I would probably never be able to listen to the opera again without shuddering.

Rigidly, I sat there, obeying Holmes.

Nolande's hair swept back and up in the breeze, revealing something on the sides of her head. Flaps of skin.

No, it couldn't be… it couldn't—

Just then, Holmes bolted upright.

Norma's voice rang through my head, bounced off the sides of my skull. I clasped my head, feeling myself slipping toward insanity, for what else could it be?

Her voice swept up, gliding toward the sweet high notes I knew so well. I was lost in the beauty, the insanity of it all… when suddenly, her voice broke mid-note, and she screeched.

"*Yog'fuhrsothothothoth 'a'a'a'memerutupao'omii!*"

In front of me, little Maria screamed. Holmes grabbed her with both arms and wrenched her back and down onto his lap. Norma broke into a stream of gibberish, Italian interspersed with English interspersed with words I didn't know.

"Hallowed by parent presence,

Aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni

He with a fish *raos* whose head is large

Let its rotting essence

Quell all else

As below, so here prevail.

Ufatu maehha faeatai tuatta iu iu rahi roa cthulhu rahi atu daghon da'agon f'hthul'rahi roa."

She hit the highest note, and she held it.

“Take her!” Holmes bellowed. He shoved Maria into my arms. She squirmed and cried out, but I held fast and tried to calm her down, though my own heart beat madly, and I wanted to scream with her.

Lucy Ann Nolande’s face went red. Her eyes were slits. Her arms beseeched the sky, her growths—or gills— fluttered wildly, and still, she held the highest note.

Holmes jumped from the stones into the water and sloshed quickly past the devotees, who screamed and waved their arms with the singer. He dove for the soprano—

—but too late—

As his arms reached for her, she fell backward into the mud, and the bizarre ceiling, that vertiginous tangle of wood slats sagging down, burst like an overstuffed sack.

Several beams crashed down onto the cult members closest to the stage. They crumpled, screaming, as others rushed over them to escape. Beams careened in midair, swiveled, and slammed into the heads of the musicians, who shrieked, clamping their hands to the sides of their faces before falling to the throng of the audience, only to be crushed beneath their feet.

Maria wailed and hid her face against my chest. I held onto her tightly, shifting my legs off the stone and into the water, moving backward, away from Holmes and *Norma* and the structure.

Holmes grappled for Nolande’s ankles; but something spewed from the wood slats, and he raised his arms over his head, shielding himself. He scrambled off the mud into the gurgling stream, slogging as quickly as he could back to me and Maria. Just as he reached us, he turned and stared, and this time, I didn’t hold back.

I screamed with the girl.

Things dropped out of the burst wood-slat monstrosity. *Things* slithered down the poles. *Things* wrapped themselves around Lucy Ann Nolande, who writhed in their grasp, shrieking with glee.

“I cannot be seeing this,” Holmes said, his voice quivering.

But he *was*. Multi-limbed creatures, froglike entities, things with tentacles oozing jelly, bulging eyes, puffy lips, gills flapping—

“*I cannot be seeing this*,” Holmes repeated. “It cannot be!”

A stack of pancake-like creatures dropped en masse at the singer’s feet, and she clasped her hands, singing those high notes—

“*F’hthul’rahi roa!*”

—that pierced my ears.

The pancakes inflated, puffed up to thrice their original size. Still stacked, they wobbled, and the cult members remaining near the stage shrank back, some gasping, some screaming as if with joy. But when the pancakes bulged outward and sprouted tentacles tipped with pinchers and claws, even those screaming with joy recoiled in terror.

Creatures ballooned into shapes I'd never seen, and they fell off one another, bouncing off the stage and into the crowd. One bounced up and landed on Lucy Ann Nolande's head. Pinchers reached down from ten or more tentacles while giant teeth burst through bloody hide and exposed what I can only describe as giant maws lined with incisors. Nolande's eyes were upon the heavens, her lips muttering prayers in gibberish, and upon her face was such glee that she must have been in the throes of madness.

In the audience, the now-bulbous creatures mowed down onlookers as easily as a giant boulder rolling down a steep incline might crush anyone in its path. Their speed shocked me. In fact, everything I was viewing shocked me.

Holmes grabbed Maria from me and fled the scene. I wasn't far behind him, and as I ran into the night I looked over my shoulder for a final glimpse of Lucy Ann Nolande. I prayed she'd still be alive, but my prayers were not answered, for upon the stage, the inflated creatures snapped her neck, pounded her body into a bloody mess, and now were busy, devouring her remains.

I stopped running. My stomach turned, but for the moment, a hideous need to see the horror kept me rooted in place.

Nobody deserves to die this way, I thought, *nobody, not even someone as vile as Professor Fitzgerald*.

Several cultists threw themselves onto the stage, but were instantly crushed and devoured. One squirmed for release, but failed.

What did those idiots hope to achieve by their sacrifice? What does anything matter once we're dead? Do these fools actually believe their deaths might satiate whatever it is that drives them into the Order of Dagon?

A bulbous creature bounced up, then crashed down upon a group of worshipers to my right, squashing them. A fountain of blood and flesh and brains spewed up and then sprayed down, nearly knocking me over.

This time, my stomach did more than turn. Doubling over, I vomited and began again to run after Holmes and Maria. Through a blur of bloody gore, I could have sworn I saw a bone sphere drop. I could have sworn I saw bones stacked in odd formations.

*

I could have sworn I saw many things that evening, but in the end, both Holmes and I could tell the local police little that they would believe. The creatures had disappeared into the mist. They'd flashed out of existence.

Yes, the police found the sphere. Yes, they found the stacks of bones. This time, we had witnessed one of the bizarre murders, and they interviewed us at length. They also rounded up various cult members for interviews, but of course, none of them admitted to seeing anything unusual.

The police had a lengthy job ahead of them, scraping human remains from Swallowhead Spring and the surrounding area. All the corpses, or what remained of the corpses, would end up in a mass grave, unmarked, along with the corpse we'd found in the barrow.

As Holmes told me, the police would never believe us. Maria carried on, begging them to listen to her, to protect her, but they took her to an orphanage for lost children. Wide green eyes, short black hair, and the haunted look of an elderly soul who'd been sucked dry from a life too hard for too long.

*

Holmes and I returned to London. We did not tell Inspector Lestrade what we had witnessed.

My friend fell into a stupor. He toyed with his needle and drugs, and I didn't try to stop him. I watched as he wound the strap around his arm and plunged the needle into his flesh.

I was in a stupor of my own.

I'd lost my Mary and Samuel. Without them, I'd lost all meaning. I'd lost a sense of myself, who I was, why I existed, why anything mattered. I smoked incessantly.

I feared for my sanity, for even back in the safety of 221B Baker Street, I could swear that I saw colors writhing across the ceiling, and black mist in the halls. Light where there should be none.

38

Early morning, and the blanched sky hung lifeless and drab. Holmes and I shuffled down Osborn Street past the *MEAT* building. Holmes's shoulders drooped. His head bent. The light dimmed in his eyes. I'd never seen him so dispirited.

Thrawl Street was bleaker than usual. Residents had coated the windowsills with salt. Some of the more prosperous had hammered horseshoes on their doors.

"Superstitions," Holmes muttered, "as if salt and horseshoes will help cure what ails this street. There is only one cure, and that is to turn off Willie Jacobs's machine."

"You really think you can do it?" I asked.

"There are no guarantees, but I must give it my best," he replied. "There remains one possibility, Watson, one idea—and if that does not work, there seem to be no more alternatives."

The building spread its shadow across the street. Holmes and I stepped into the swathe of gloom, and I shivered, remembering the black mist of Swallowhead Spring. I glanced at Holmes. His skin was as blanched as the sky. His face sagged. The look in his eyes was haunted.

"I cannot fail," he said softly. "I must beat this thing down. Science *must* prevail. Superstition has no place in the world, Watson, *only* science. What we perceive today as otherworldly, we will know as science tomorrow. I am certain of it."

Without this belief, Sherlock Holmes would crumble. He would never see the world in the same way. He would cease to function. Gone would be the great consulting detective who had propelled forensics from mere guesswork into the scientific conclusions of the modern laboratory.

"But how?" I said. "How do we explain what we saw?"

He stared at me, and after a long pause, answered.

"I have no evidence of any explanation based on science. There are theories, that's all. Perhaps the creatures already were *perched* within that mound of slats, just waiting to drop down upon Lucy Ann Nolande."

"Yes," I said, "perhaps they crouched within the bulge that hung over her, *yes*, and then they burst out and fell." Yet somehow, it felt like grasping at straws.

“Exactly,” Holmes said. “It is a theory. But then, where did they go? After they killed Lucy Ann Nolande, did they simply evaporate into thin air? They must have gone somewhere, Watson.”

I had considered this point. At length.

We’d run from the scene along with the others at the performance. In the days that followed, we’d read nothing in the newspapers about creatures attacking people anywhere else in England. Scotland Yard received no reports. Had the creatures disappeared back into the void from which they’d come? How could physical matter disappear, violating the laws of men as well as science?

“Perhaps they live in the forests,” I suggested, “and perhaps there aren’t many of them. Perhaps they didn’t vanish before our eyes. The mist was heavy that night. Under cover of the mist, they must have run into the trees.”

“Perhaps,” Holmes said, “and *perhaps*.” He shook his head. “We know nothing about these creatures yet. As I said, I have only theories. No, they didn’t disappear, just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “They went somewhere.”

Having arrived at our destination, he changed the topic.

“And now, would you kindly press in the numbers so we can get inside and test my other theory, the one that I hope will shut down this infernal machine once and for all?” He seemed to steel himself, and I was pleased to see a sense of purpose, however diminished.

Scrabbling to comply, I wondered if the creatures had been in the tram machine building, as well, and had killed Theodore Jacobs. If they could drop out of nowhere at Swallowhead Spring, then why couldn’t they do so here in London?

I pressed in the numbers—*300000*, speed of light in kilometers per second, or possibly, how weak full moonlight was compared to sunlight.

Then *437 500*, astronomical measurements per Mary’s guesswork, and *197*, the atomic weight of gold, *207*, the atomic weight of lead.

Followed by *82 79 18*, still unknown to us.

Finally, *16*, the atomic weight of oxygen.

The door creaked up. In the shadows the beast gleamed. Near the top, a valve opened then clacked shut. It was mocking us, winking… *But no,* I was losing my grip; machines neither mocked nor winked. *No, it was all in my head*.

Like the creatures.

There was a healthy glow to the steel, as if the beast had recently feasted and felt flush. It gently pulsed, nodding off like an old man after a large meal. Dense bushes of cable and pipe coated the floor and inched up the walls, reminding me of the thickets Holmes and I had battled en route to Swallowhead Spring.

Boots crunched over metal, and Willie Jacobs ducked beneath the overhang of steel limbs and knotted wires, to emerge by the eerie white glow of the phosphorus pit. His face was a black slick of grease. His few remaining hairs coiled off his splotched head. Along his jaw, the skin puffed gray and pulpy. It wouldn't be long—perhaps a matter of weeks, maybe less—before the necrosis thoroughly rotted his jawbone, and it fractured.

The beast thrummed with life.

The steel limbs stretched and rattled.

The floor began to shake.

The valve opened again, and it remained open. My nostrils twitched as I tried to adjust to the heavy garlic stench.

"You have what I sent you to purchase?" Holmes asked.

"I do," Jacobs said. "'ere is the remainin' money." He offered Holmes some coins, but Holmes waved them aside.

"Where's the crowbar?" my friend said quietly. Jacobs gestured to his left, and Holmes retrieved a long tool from a stack of pipes by the wall.

The beast quivered. It belched steam. Fire sparked from steel, then coiled into spirals that wound into the nether reaches of the building. Shadows and steam, grease and eerie white glows… all converged and split, and then merged again into bizarre shapes that had no names.

Beside me, Holmes's body grew rigid. He straightened his back, shook his shoulders, tilted up his chin, and stared at the beast as if daring it to oppose him.

"Mr. Jacobs, this machine has killed enough innocent people, including your father. The man responsible for this machine is Professor Henry Fitzgerald, *not* you and *not* your father. Fitzgerald gave you the money that enabled you to build the machine.

"Another man, Amos Beiler, constructed furniture and a barn with oddly angled dimensions and similar properties," he continued. "As a result, Amos Beiler died. We also know of men killed in tunnels possessing oddly angled dimensions and similar properties in Blois, France. Finally, we have

witnessed, with our own eyes, murder at the hands of another bizarre construction of inexplicable angles.

“All of these structures have one thing in common, what I’ve come to think of as angles of *deadly dimensions*.”

“The beast! It kills!” Jacobs cried out. “I tol’ you at the beginnin’, I tol’ you that it kills! But you didn’t believe.”

His emaciated body went into a spasm. He wept openly, his face betraying acute pain. His fingers rapidly poked the left side of his nose, then flitted across the top before jabbing the bottoms of both nostrils. He whimpered as his fingers flew, jabbing over and over again, and then he curled them into a ball. His knuckles swept rapidly across the bottom of his nose, batting the large scabs encrusted on each side.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. Without thinking, I grabbed his wrist and forced him to stop. He shrank back and wrenched from my grasp. The hand returned to his face, the fingers to his nose.

I looked away, feeling my face flush.

“The machine does not kill,” Holmes insisted. “Men kill. Fitzgerald kills. *He* is responsible for this machine.”

I regained my composure, my heart welling for Willie Jacobs, his phossy jaw, his rotting face, his pain, his scabs. I put an arm over the poor man’s shoulders. He almost fell to the floor. I held onto him and eased him down, where he crouched and continued to whimper. This time I didn’t try to stop him from jabbing at his face. Whether it was a nervous tic or caused by the phossy jaw, it gave the fellow some relief. Given his suffering and pain and possible death, *any* relief had its worth.

Holmes began to pry open crates arrayed by the steel thicket growing up the right wall. He stopped, stripped off his coat, and tossed it aside, then continued, using Willie Jacobs’s crowbar. The crates contained large gray bags.

“The creatures hide in the ceilings and the crevasses of these structures, somehow,” Holmes said. “They produce the oddly etched bone spheres, *somehow*. They obtain or produce the unknown types of bones, *somehow*. They stack the bones, *somehow*. They originate from unknown places, hence, the strange ice bug, the strange hairs, the mysterious types of blood and bones.”

“Holmes,” I objected, helping Jacobs stand up again. “We have too many *somehows*.”

Holmes grew rigid again. When he turned to face me, I had to recoil from his anger.

“Don’t press me, Watson,” he said, pointing a finger at me. “I shall shut off this machine so no one else dies here. This is what we’re here to do *today*. That is all. The Beiler mechanism killed once, then subsided. The Blois mechanism killed once, then subsided. The *Norma* construction… it is too early to know, I suppose. But this tram machine, it’s different, Watson. It feeds on phosphorus and lead. It produces gold. The other structures don’t produce gold. They don’t *feed*. I believe strongly that, if we shut down this machine, the bizarre murders in London will cease.”

“Could it be that these creatures come from a place beyond ours, a place unknown, a supernatural place?” I continued despite Holmes’s anger. “Think of all the clues related to space and time. You mentioned *Flatland* yourself, Holmes, a story in which creatures exist in other dimensional planes. The code found in the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*, numbers of the universe. The Order of Dagon, with its multiples of three and its notions of fertility and space and time, the cult leaders claiming Druidic origins. Could this Dagon and his creatures come from a place unknown to us?”

Abruptly, Jacobs shrieked. “It is alive from otherwheres! It comes to kill us all!” I released him and jumped back. “You can’t turn it off! No floods, no fires, no nothin’! It done this to me face, I knows, and it’s goin’ to smash me ’ead, too! It’s goin’ to kill us all…”

He wept uncontrollably, throwing himself across the floor. Whatever had rotted his flesh must have rotted his brain, as well.

“I won’t dignify your questions with answers, Watson. You know what I think about such matters. You’re being absurd.”

And that was all that Holmes would say on the subject. We’d never confronted a puzzle as difficult as this one. We’d solved crimes that others had thought magical in nature. Always, Holmes had come up with logical, fact-based solutions.

This time, he remained baffled, but if we could turn off this damned machine, then for the moment, we would need to be satisfied and consider it a victory against these deadly dimensions, whatever they were. Assuming that we *could* succeed in turning the damned machine off.

I still didn’t know what Holmes had in mind.

“Watson,” he said, “you’ll have to help me. Mr. Jacobs is clearly too ill. When we’re done, he goes directly to the hospital.” He arched his

eyebrows, indicating a direction behind the building, a direction a few streets hence, I knew, and the location of the Whitechapel Lunatic Asylum.

My heart sunk. I had so hoped to save Willie Jacobs, but there was no hope for him. He would sink farther into madness, would die, and only Holmes and I would attend his funeral, no doubt held at a remote plot with no cross, no marker, and no minister. Amos Beiler's grave came to mind. This is what we did to the indigent, the misunderstood, the downcast.

Jacobs crawled to the wall and cowered, sniffling, jabbing his nose, and wailing nonsense. With a pained expression, Holmes directed me to leave Jacobs alone, then he lifted a bag by the wall and carried it to the phosphorus pit.

"We're going to feed the machine," he told me, "but not its usual meal."

"Won't it react violently?" I remembered only too clearly the last time the beast became angry. I'd almost died.

"I'll be with you," Holmes answered. "If you die, so will I." As if this would provide some reassurance. Then, without another word, he dumped the contents of the bag into the pit.

"A combination of lead plus phosphorus yields gold and something else. We need 41 of something else to balance the two sides of the equation, Watson."

"I remember," I said. "You suspect an unknown catalyst energizes the beast and helps produce the gold along with the mystery product, X."

"It's still conjecture, though I prefer to think of it as an educated guess. All that really matters, Watson, is that we reduce the threat of the machine. That we make it non-violent. If we cannot turn it off completely, we subdue it."

"Science moves so slowly," I said. "Perhaps a hundred years hence, scientists will understand."

Holmes looked doubtful and did not answer. He opened another bag and dumped its contents into the pit. Gray metal floated on eerie white liquid. Black steam spewed up, and Holmes and I staggered back, clenching our noses in our fists and gagging.

"Step number one," Holmes said. "Give it the lead."

"*Give it phosphorus!*" Willie Jacobs screamed from the corner. "The phosphorus must be next! You're waitin' too long! *Do it, do it now!*"

"There will be no phosphorus," Holmes said, more to me than to Jacobs, who started crawling toward the door.

“But Holmes—” I said.

“No phosphorus, Watson. *Think*.”

This was not the time to think. It was the time to do.

“What do we need? Where do I get it?” I asked.

He gestured at more of the bags. I lifted one and carried it to the pit. When I dumped the contents, *sand* flowed into the pit. The eerie white grains disappeared into gray muck, which bubbled and gurgled. Holmes and I dumped two more bags of sand into the hole.

“Sand is generally silicon dioxide,” Holmes said. “Silicon itself has an atomic weight of 28. We must account for the fact this sand contains oxygen, as well as silicon, so we must add more sand to make sure we have enough silicon. As for the oxygen, the heat in the pit breaks up the silicon dioxide into silicon plus oxygen gas. It is only the silicon itself that participates in our reaction.

“We’re replacing the phosphorus, with its atomic weight of 31, with silicon,” he continued. “Giving the machine approximately the same total atomic weight of combined silicon and lead.” I confessed that I didn’t understand. He continued: “I’m substituting an element that is very close in atomic weight to phosphorus, hoping our unknown catalyst will be less efficient. Hence, I’m hoping the machine will not grow violent. Thanks to the lead, it will have enough energy to run, yet not feel threatened—and not have enough energy to kill.”

“But it requires phosphorus. Lestrade tried feeding it other things. Water and wood, as I recall.”

“He did so without any grasp of science, Watson,” Holmes replied with a hint of his old cockiness. “He didn’t keep the atomic weights—the amounts of food energies, if you will—this close. Lestrade’s attempts were stabs in the dark, though I do applaud his efforts. What we’re doing is more quantitative, and I’m hoping it will work. The whole mechanism relies on our mystery catalyst.”

As we dumped more sand, the room filled with the smell of chlorine, and suddenly, a jet of gas erupted from the pit and shot straight to the ceiling, where cables crackled and fell.

Holmes and I jumped back. We hoisted Willie Jacobs between us and helped him toward the open door. I hoped with everything in me that fire would erupt and bring the whole building down, but it didn’t. The ceiling stood strong. The beast rattled, and its limbs crashed against the cement

floor and the walls. The cables swung wildly, lashing out as before and barely missing the three of us as we crouched near the door, waiting for a safe opportunity to dash outside.

Holmes kept a hand on my arm, indicating he wanted to stay and witness the culmination of his chemistry experiment with the beast. Both Jacobs and I were anxious to leave. We both tugged at him, but he wouldn't budge. Despite my concern, however, I wasn't going to leave without him.

The pit simmered, the eerie glow dimmed, and then the whole thing erupted again, sending another jet of gas up to the ceiling. Cables crackled overhead and sparks rained down, quickly dying on the floor.

Something rolled against my foot. It was a chunk of gold. Jacobs stooped and grabbed it, stuffing it into his pocket. His expression spread into a rotting-tooth grin.

Holmes clutched Jacobs with one hand and me with his other hand. We ducked into the street while the mechanical monster raged behind us.

Despite its convulsions, however, it could not reach beyond the confines of the building, and its energies dimmed. Holmes had not succeeded in turning off the beast, but he had succeeded in switching it to what he considered "a slow simmer." It would continue to "live," he said, surprising me with the word, but it would not grow violent. It couldn't quite tell the difference between the food it received now and the old phosphorus-and-lead meals that Willie Jacobs and his father had provided.

"You think it *lives*?" I asked.

"No," Holmes said. "What makes you think *that*?"

"Because you said…" I trailed off and didn't finish the sentence.

"As I see it," he said, "I'm giving it enough energy to survive, and yet the unknown mystery catalyst apparently does not work as well with silicon as it does with phosphorus. The machine no longer has sufficient energy to kill."

"But how did you know this?" I asked.

He hesitated to answer me, and when he did, he was more noncommittal than I'd ever heard him.

"I had a theory," he said. "I tested it. There was nothing else to try. Chemistry is an evolving science, Watson."

39

It was late evening when Mrs. Hudson delivered a sealed note to Holmes's rooms. She inquired about Mary and Samuel, and when I told her that Lestrade had yet to find them, she tried her best to console me.

"He'll find them, Dr. Watson, mark my words. I have more faith in the Inspector and Scotland Yard than perhaps others in this room." Her eyes darted to Holmes, who didn't take the bait. He was deep in his own thoughts, elbows propped on his knees, gazing at the opposite wall.

I took the note, thanked her, and ushered her out.

Holmes snapped back to attention and flicked his fingers at me.

"The note, Dr. Watson. Let me see it," he said.

As it was addressed to him, I did as he requested, and he slipped his finger beneath the seal on the envelope, noting that the wax formed an intricate *M*.

"As I thought," he said. "Professor Moriarty is in touch with me again. Let us see what he wants this time, shall we?" The note was brief, and as if emphasizing the ironic, "he's penned it in your handwriting again, Doctor," Holmes said. Then he read it aloud.

"St. Bride's Sufferance Wharf. Bank of the Thames. A warehouse, 11 tonight. Sources reveal that F. will unleash monsters. Hundreds will die, perhaps more. Catch F. Shut him down." The note ended with an address and the simple signature, *M*.

"Shall we inform Lestrade?" I asked.

Holmes tapped the stem of his pipe, then puffed on it a few times. Smoke curled from his thin lips. His gray eyes lit with excitement.

"No," he said. "They would never believe it—a warning based on a note from a known criminal. That a madman is about to unleash monsters? No, they would scoff. Worse, they might delay us. We'll go there ourselves, catch Fitzgerald in the act."

"In the act of doing *what*?"

"We shall find out. If he tries to kill someone, we'll grab him before he can succeed. If he does anything *remotely* criminal, we'll get him—and that's when we'll involve the Yard."

"Do you think Moriarty is afraid, and that's why he's sending you tonight?"

Holmes smiled a grim smile. “No. Moriarty is no more afraid than I am. He is cunning. If we fail and are eliminated, then he has removed the greatest thorn in his side. On the other hand, if I stop Fitzgerald and have the police arrest him, then Moriarty gets what he wants—control of the London underworld, return of his men and, he hopes, gold and the mechanism that creates it.

“What he doesn’t know,” Holmes added, “is that the only mechanism that creates the gold is Willie Jacobs’s tram machine.”

Just that afternoon, Holmes and I had deposited poor Willie at the Whitechapel Lunatic Asylum. He’d been muttering incoherently, and while the police no longer wanted him for murdering his father, Willie Jacobs’s fate was far worse than a jail sentence. He was imprisoned in his own mind. Rotting from the inside out.

And what about the rest of us? I wondered. Holmes had been profoundly unsettled by what we’d seen at Swallowhead Spring. He still couldn’t explain the odd stacks of bones, the unidentifiable bone fragments, the strange insect and hair, the silhouette in the Blois tunnels.

Most confounding were the spherical bones. Neither could he explain the symbols in the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*, nor the fact that we couldn’t touch it without wearing special gloves.

My own situation was little better. I kept hearing warbling and screeching in my dreams, strange litanies of gibberish and wailing. I sometimes saw things that couldn’t be there, wisps of color where the walls meet the ceiling, tendrils of bubbles floating in the cracks along the street.

Would we both end up like Willie Jacobs?

Holmes pried me loose from my thoughts and insisted that we prepare for the evening’s adventure. This meant donning our shabby workmen’s disguises, again with sufficient twists that Fitzgerald and his henchmen wouldn’t recognize us. Tonight, we wore black—*all black*. Holmes wanted to “fade into the night,” as he put it.

He had the foresight to warn Inspector Lestrade to be on alert. He’d sent a note to the Yard that he might be in touch and require assistance, but he carefully didn’t mention where we were going or why we were going there. Nothing that would cause them to disregard the note as the ravings of a madman.

Yet is that what they are? I wondered. *Ravings…*

We went by carriage as far as the driver would take us into a very dodgy area, then we disembarked and walked toward St. Bride's Sufferance Wharf, which took us down New Gravel Lane and then right along the Thames. Nobody came here except killers and their unfortunate prey.

The belly of the sky was heavy with rain, and the air smelled moist and cool. My footsteps clicked across the stones, and through my mind ran the staccato version of *Norma* we'd heard at Swallowhead.

Yog'fuhrsothothothoth 'a'a'a'memerutupao'omii!

Hallowed by parent presence.

Aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni

He with a fish *raos* whose head is large…

Let its rotting essence…

Quell all else…

As below, so here prevail…

Ufatu maehha faeatai tuatta iu iu rahi roa cthulhu rahi atu daghon da'agon f'hthul'rahi roa.

The words were fresher in my mind than I liked.

Lucy Ann Nolande was with her gods, which both Holmes and I agreed could not be of Druidic origin. We felt certain that Fitzgerald had played upon the superstitions of those inclined to join his order. He'd seen the clusters of threes, he'd seen the triangular formations, he'd seen the potential to prey upon the weak, who craved what they perceived to be power, authority, control, dominance, superiority.

But the Order of Dagon broke from Druidic tradition. The very things that unsettled Holmes were the ones that did not conform to Druidic practices and myths, and thus fell into the realm of the completely unknown. The bone stacks and spheres, the symbols, the creatures over the *Norma* stage, the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*.

He refused to state the obvious, that whatever was behind the facts Holmes could not explain was also behind the murders of both Beiler and Jacobs. While I agreed that Fitzgerald should be behind bars, I also knew that the hands that had committed the violence belonged to someone—*or something*—else.

As we approached the warehouse, the sky thundered and split open, dumping rain from dark sky to dark street. My mind tuned into the rain, to the pelting and the patter of the drops, and the staccato in my mind grew more frenzied.

Aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa demoni. Aauhaoaoa demoni aauhaoaoa.… I couldn't stop the pulsing of the words any more than I could stop the pounding of the rain.

An eddy of black surged from an alley to my left, and I recoiled. The cobblestones cracked. The rain swirled. My heart drowned out the staccato chant drumming through my head. I stopped, clasped my chest. I was breathing heavily.

Heart attack?

I knew the symptoms, but I'd never had chest pains or difficulty breathing before. Yet my symptoms were stranger: the chanting in my head and the rain pounding in peculiar rhythms.

"Come on, we're almost there!" Holmes yelled above the din.

My clothes were drenched, as were Holmes's. The black hair of his wig hung in wet clumps over his forehead and ears. Rain splashed off his cap. Shivering, I *willed* myself to move my legs again, to ignore the chant percolating in the recesses of my mind.

The wind picked up. We held onto each other and pressed forward. I clamped a hand to my head, holding both wig and cap in place, and Holmes did the same. We finally arrived at a black wooden structure that Holmes told me was Fitzgerald's warehouse. Small and irregularly shaped, it stood low, the roof clattering on its beams. The siding was raw and unpainted, and nails popped, unhinging the wooden planks, which slammed against each other as the storm raged.

To our left, the Thames crashed against shacks that edged the river, a dilapidated hem of the city. Rowboats bobbed while larger ships loomed, securely anchored. We ducked in through a back door, and as it slammed shut, the wind howled.

We were in a small room, candlelit, with crates stacked around the walls and people huddled in small groups.

"Welcome, neophytes of Dagon."

"And you are…?" Holmes said without flinching.

Before us stood—or rather, hunched—a man with huge thighs and shoulders, and a torso easily as long as his legs. Huge lidless eyes protruded

from a sickly green face, and his mouth twitched into a leer that stretched from one set of gills to the other.

My God, I thought, unable to imagine such deformity.

He wore ordinary clothing, just as we did, but in his case, the trousers were tight on his waist and thighs and flapped loosely from the knees down. His shirt fit snugly across his shoulders, then hung unbuttoned over an undergarment to what I assumed to be the bottom of his ribcage.

He continued to leer, as if determining our worth and deciding that we had none.

"I am merely a follower of Lord Dagon, as are the rest that you see here. I am the Questioner." He stared. "You appear out of place," he said and then added, "if you will excuse me for saying so."

For a cult member engaged in criminal activities, possibly murder, the fellow had impressive manners.

I quickly scanned the room and noted that most of the followers of Lord Dagon appeared normal—that is to say, human without froglike overtones.

"You've not seen us before," Holmes said in his workman's rough voice. "We are careful who sees us. The Order is secret. We are faithful, and we keep it secret."

"You come on the night of all nights," the Questioner said. "Our leader brings the Esoteric Order of Dagon to its destiny tonight. Are you prepared, sirs, to fulfill your destiny?"

Holmes's eyes shone bright as a lunatic's. He held the Questioner's hands in his own, and the Questioner gently slipped his hands free, clasping them behind his back.

"We come to see the Old Ones return to their rightful places," Holmes said. "We are alone, disdaining grosser Earth's nocturnal veil." He spoke the phrase from *Norma* that we'd heard at the Loggerheads—so convincingly that it made me shudder. Holmes fit right in with the other devotees of Dagon.

"*Dub'ghreet. Vzulvzghq'q'q'yuh. Dub'ghreet vzulvzghq 'q'q'yuh q'q'q'vzulvzgh*." Our interrogator nodded and swept his hand aside, granting us entry into the room.

I'd frankly expected a larger crowd. The devotees numbered fifty or fewer—scruffy, downtrodden workmen and a sprinkling of women with fierce faces and stocky bodies.

As at Swallowhead Spring, Holmes preferred to remain on the outskirts of the main group, in this case loitering near the door. The Questioner pushed his way to the other end of the small room, and as he stood before the followers, they sank to the floor, some sitting cross-legged, others propped on their knees and bowing, their heads and arms dipped to the floor. As Holmes and I stood on the periphery, our backs against a stack of crates, they began to chant.

"After the stars are gone…
After the stars are gone…
Ch'thgalhn fhtagn urre'h nyogthluh'eeh ngh syh'kyuhyuh.
Cthulhu! Oh Deep Ones! Oh Great Old Ones!
Dagon be all.
Restore the Others as our rulers."

I heard the baritone, its odd off-key lilt, its eerie keening, the sounds that no human voice should be able to make.

It was Fitzgerald. He was coming.

With a flourish, the froglike man opened a door in the right-hand wall, and out stepped Professor Henry Fitzgerald dressed in a velvet cloak embroidered with multi-limbed creatures, the ruffled cuffs, a headdress with metal mistletoe engraved along a three-lobed ridge on top. He opened his arms wide and smiled broadly.

His followers moaned their greetings.

"*Ebb'yuh dissoth'nknpflknghreet*.
Eeesh-beanjzh-ig-gooolmoreunjghtzaicklefrosh g'vlag.
Hahuhoaoao yuhmoni'khu'eenee'eet."

Holmes and I bowed low with our arms extended but said nothing. Had we attempted to mimic the sounds around us, it would be clear to the followers that we were intruders. It was enough that we were bowing while the other followers were stretched out upon the ground—this alone might bring Fitzgerald's attention our way—but Holmes needed to see clearly

what was happening at the front of the room. We remained in the back, where no candles flickered and we could remain shrouded in dark.

Several men lifted crates that were stacked behind Fitzgerald. Prying them open, they withdrew various objects, handling them all with utmost care, and set them on the floor at Fitzgerald's feet. Many in the crowd wriggled away from Fitzgerald, as if afraid. Some came a scant yard from the back door, where Holmes and I now squatted, peering over their heads.

"I believe we will finally learn the truth," Holmes whispered behind a cupped hand. "Look at those objects, Watson. *Bones*—"

I peered through the candlelit gloom and watched as our froglike host pulled a few dozen odd-shaped bones from a crate. At that distance, it was impossible to tell whether the bones were human, but my best guess was that many were not.

"The odd stacks of bones," Holmes whispered, and then, "they have the *spherical* ones, as well!" Indeed, the Questioner lifted a dozen spherical bones from the crate, one after another, handling them gently as he settled them on the floor in front of Fitzgerald. Then the final ingredient.

Gold.

Even in the dim light, I *knew* that it was *gold*. Fitzgerald held each of a dozen chunks up for the crowd to see before depositing them next to the bones on the floor. The chunks were the approximate size of those found in the tram building, following the machine's feedings.

"He has a fortune," I whispered to Holmes. "What the deuce is he up to?"

"He financed constructions of the tram machine and the stage for the performance of *Norma*. He was connected to Amos Beiler as an overlord of some kind, I would guess. Beiler built an oddly shaped barn and bizarrely shaped furniture. Watson, I believe we're about to witness the unveiling of another object. Keep your wits about you." Then he fell silent, putting his finger to his lips.

The crowd began chanting in unison. I say "unison" because there was a harmony of sorts to what they warbled, hissed, wheezed, and spluttered, but the noises coming from these people were in no language I knew.

Some of the voices were shrill, rising to high notes that broke in burbles and trills. Moaning, screeching, whimpering, all blended into a unified whole that shivered up my back and sent my nerves aflame. I pressed my hands over my ears, trying to muffle the noise.

Holmes wrenched my hands down and shook his head, *no*. But his pinched expression told me that he, too, was at breaking point.

Meanwhile, Fitzgerald stooped and ratcheted the bones together at their ends. They fit together, notch into notch, reminding me of Amos Beiler's wood joints. Holmes was right! Fitzgerald was building another object of deadly dimensions right before our eyes, and this time he was using the bones, the spheres, and the gold.

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Soon Fitzgerald's construction lay upon the floor, hinged like the backbone of a snake. He lifted a piece of gold and slipped it into place on a bone spur, twisting to lock it down. The gold jutted up like a prong. Equidistantly along the backbone, Fitzgerald screwed in the other gold prongs.

Fitzgerald dominated the small, airless room. These people were unlike the Druids of old. They worshiped an entity called Dagon. They ranted about Old Ones, the Others, Deep Ones, and something called Cthulhu. They believed that these creatures lived along energy lines deep within the earth and beneath the seas.

Some of the cultists had mutations unlike anything I'd ever seen. One of the most extreme examples was the froglike Questioner who was helping Fitzgerald with the snakelike backbone, the gold prongs, and spherical bones.

"Do you think the Order of Dagon *preceded* the Druids?" I whispered. "Could it be that this cult has been here all this time in England, waiting through the generations, for the right time?"

Before Holmes could reply, Fitzgerald raised his arms and gestured at the crowd to fall silent. Thankfully, the cacophony of gutturals and high-octave screeching simmered, then died down. My ears buzzed with sweetness, a colorful sound that rode the light shimmering from the candles. Outside, the Thames pounded the shore, the wind battered the old warehouse.

I felt lightheaded, dizzy.

Holmes looked quizzically at me, eyebrows lifted. He nodded once, indicating that he agreed with my conjecture. It did make sense.

Fitzgerald, Ashberton, Wiltshram, all firmly believed that they were descended from Druids, their motifs were all Druidic in nature, and yet, they also firmly believed in Dagon, and led that order.

The Questioner opened a thick book bound in what appeared to be animal hide—perhaps a copy of the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*. Lidless eyes peered through the crowd to the back of the room, where Holmes and I now huddled with the others. The man's gills fluttered a few times. With his eyes focused on a page in the book, he began to warble.

"Vavao apapavai reva revapihaarau ria ria

Aaa aaa aaa!
Huaru paareare taiharato te hoe maa pape rana
Shigeonoth shiggaion pharemake perosephora
peresibutero paieti raumea toatoaarii eh toatoa.”

A grizzled man in front of us moaned and keeled over. Two others reached for him, and their voices keened.

“Ebb’yuh dissoth’nknpflknghreet.
Hahuhoaoao yuhmoni’khu’eenee’eet.”

Fitzgerald picked up the chant, merging streams of gibberish uttered by both the Questioner and the crowd.

“Huaru paareare taiharato te hoe maa pape rana
Hahuhoaoao yuhmoni’khu’eenee’eet.”

He lifted one of the spherical bones. He peered into the hole, presumably looking at the symbol on the opposite inner side.

“*Fhtagn*,” he intoned.

Gently, as if handling a newborn baby, he cradled the bone in the crook of his arm, rocked it twice, then slid it onto a gold prong jutting up from one of the ends of the snakelike backbone. From where Holmes and I sat, this first bone sphere was rightmost on the snake.

“What is he doing?” I whispered.

“His mind was infected long ago,” a man to my left said. “You should know this. He was altered by the Old Ones to interpret the ultimate diagram, and this is the snake from the Great Beyond. Only he and the Supreme Almighty of the Order of Dagon and of the slab of open waters at Half Moon Bay can build that which calls forth the Others from the void.”

“Ah, he builds the snake.” I nodded sagely, as if I understood all that the other man said. Of course, I didn’t have a clue what he meant, and from the look on Holmes’s face, he was as puzzled as I was. The thought was disconcerting.

Fitzgerald lifted another sphere, peered inside at its symbol.

"*Urre'h*."

He placed the second sphere on the gold prong next to the first one.

The third bone sphere.

"*Nyogthluh'eeh*," he intoned, and he placed it on the third prong… and so forth, until most of the spheres sat in perfect alignment upon the prongs jutting up from the snakelike backbone.

"After the stars are gone," Fitzgerald said, "after the fertility rights are fulfilled, as they were with the Supreme Almighty and his Half Moon Bay breeding mate, Amelia Scarcliffe—"

"Breeding mate?" I said. "If Mary heard me call her that—"

"Quiet!" The man to my side scowled, rose, and shuffled to the other end of the room.

Fitzgerald's chanting became more feverish. He uttered each symbol—slurs that no ordinary human voice can duplicate—in higher notes, higher volumes, and more intense screeches. His baritone cracked at the higher notes, the screeches like metal grates scraping along my nerves.

"The connections among the Amos Beiler, Theodore Jacobs, and Marceau Poisson deaths eluded me," Holmes whispered. "The drawings and instructions left on the ancient hide could be interpreted only by great masters like Beiler, Jacobs, and the French sculptor." He considered, then added, "There may be more."

A sound took our attention back to the front of the room, where Fitzgerald slipped the tenth bone sphere upon the tenth gold prong. The snakelike backbone began to writhe upon the floor, its hinges clicking as it moved.

"The bone spheres," Holmes whispered, "the arcane symbols inside each of them—Fitzgerald was *collecting* them. He's fitting the spheres on the gold prongs in a precise symbolic order, Watson."

"The order given in his copy of the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*."

The backbone slithered around Fitzgerald, the ratcheted bones clanking on the floor, the gold glowing in the candlelight, as Fitzgerald swayed and shrieked the insane words from before.

"Vavao apapavai reva revapihaarau ria ria

Aaa aaa aaa!

Huaru paareare taiharato te hoe maa pape rana

Shigeonoth shiggaion pharemake perosephora
peresibutero paieti raumea toatoaarii eh toatoa…”

To this, the crowd screamed:

“Ebb’yuh dissoth’nknpflknghreet.
Hahuhoaoao yuhmoni’khu’eenee’eet.”

The wind slammed the building from the left, and the whole structure shook and creaked to the right. The ceiling cracked down the middle and hung, sloping like inverted foothills across the room. I cringed back, yet the crowd either didn’t notice, or they didn’t care. They leapt to their feet, shrieking nonsense syllables and discordant gibberish.

Holmes yanked me up. Around us careened the followers of Dagon, arms waving, heads thrown back, mouths open, eyes feverish, all screaming at the ceiling, which split widely, displaying a gash of night sky.

Holmes and I leapt for the door.

But when the thunder boomed and the lightning buzzed overhead, we swiveled and stared with everyone else. Up, up at the sky through the yawning hole in the warehouse ceiling— Behind the rain, I saw the moon, and it *vibrated*.

Along the edges of the broken ceiling, something twitched and skittered.

We staggered back, and there was such fear in Holmes’s eyes and on his face that my heart sank. It would take the end of everything we believe, the end of life as we know it, to strike fear into Sherlock Holmes. I had never seen him in this state. Never had we encountered anything he couldn’t eventually explain.

This, right here, right now, this—

It was beyond imagining!

Snakelike things writhed above us, flailing toward the vibrating moon and lashing at the people below. The snakes—for there is no other word to describe them— slashed into the froglike Questioner, whose eyes bulged yet wider as he was ripped to shreds. Other serpents whipped out and struck down men as they screamed and raced around the room. One eviscerated a

man right in front of me. One minute he was whole and intact, and the next his torso was a bloody cavern, his organs were on the floor, and then he *fell*.

Things—creatures like the ones that fell from Fitzgerald's stage at Swallowhead Spring—dropped out of the hole above. Like the others, these were multi-limbed, froglike beasts, things with tentacles oozing jelly, bulging eyes, puffy lips, and flapping gills.

"No!" Holmes cried. "No, it *cannot* be!"

The cultists struggled with the beasts, some trying to punch their way to freedom, but the tentacles wrapped around the men and squeezed until they exploded, blood and fat and organs spraying the people around them. Holmes was drenched in blood. Brain and guts coated my hair and my head, and dripped down my shoulders.

The snakes above us split open, just as the ceiling had done, and their backbones rained down upon us—spines made up of ratcheted oddly shaped bones and prongs with spheres on them. A sphere rolled to my feet and I lifted it, stared inside the eye hole. It was too dark in the room for me to see any symbol that might be etched on the inside. I set the sphere down as shreds of thick hide floated down.

Grasping some of it, I fingered it, and it reminded me of the animal hide cover of the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*. Fire sizzled and scorched my fingers, and I dropped the fragment, shaking my hand. A dark blood, the color of the ink on the ancient diagrams and in the *Auctoritatem*, oozed from the split snakes, forming puddles in which the spherical bones rolled.

Cult members slapped off the tentacles, but to little avail. Most were on their hands and knees, slopping through blood and gore, trying desperately to get to the door where we stood. Fitzgerald remained at the front of the room in a trance, still chanting with his arms held high.

"We have opened the door to Dagon and his Deep Ones," he screamed. "I am the true leader of the Order of Dagon! I am the one who makes the snake. I, and only I, control the gold, the snakes, the beasts, the oceans and seas, the heavens and skies, the world below, the world beyond!"

He screeched steadily, a high-pitched stream of singsong words.

"It is his mind," a cult member shouted. "The Deep Ones have taken control!" He threw himself to the floor and twisted unnaturally.

Fitzgerald lifted the leftmost spherical bone off his writhing snake construction, and he blew across the hole while still keening the bizarre syllables. Then he lifted the spherical bone next to the first one, and

repeated his actions, blowing across the hole while keening. And then the third, and the fourth, and so on.

When he was midway down the backbone, Holmes grabbed me.

“We must stop him!” he cried. “We must stop him before he kills everyone!” He shoved through the crowd of cult members and I followed, over the heaps of bones, the mounds of gore, the injured, the sobbing wretches, and through the hot blood.

We reached the insane Professor Fitzgerald.

Holmes drew back his right arm.

41

Holmes's fist landed squarely on Fitzgerald's jaw.

The lunatic lurched backward, stumbled over a corpse, and crashed against the crates stacked by the wall. Holmes moved in for the kill, grabbing the collar of Fitzgerald's velvet cloak and wrenching the man off the crates. His right fist slammed into Fitzgerald's face again, cracking the head back. Fitzgerald groaned, scrambled to gain his footing, and swung out a leg, tripping Holmes, who lost his grip on the velvet cloak.

"I must finish!" Fitzgerald screamed, but as he scrabbled to pluck the bone spheres from the gold prongs, he threw up his arms in despair—for the pieces of his novel construction had scattered across the floor, some becoming wedged into corpses and others lodged in piles of gore and bone.

The serpents writhing on the edges of the broken ceiling whipped up and lashed at the stormy sky.

"They can't get through," Fitzgerald cried. "They're leaving, but *no*, I can't let them, *no!* Dagon must be unleashed! Yog-Sothoth must open the way! Cthulhu must rule!"

Holmes and I both dove for him. I strained to reach his legs in hopes of bringing him down, but instead, I ripped off his cloak. I slid on the smear of blood that slicked the floor and nearly fell myself, but crouched, got my footing, and rose again, this time slamming my fist into Fitzgerald's stomach.

He doubled over. Holmes grabbed both sides of the man's face and smashed him against the wall.

A cultist leapt from my left and threw himself at me, his knife hovering over my face, ready to plunge and kill. I didn't have time to *think*, only to react. I braced myself, grabbed his shoulders with both hands, and with my remaining strength, flung him off. He crashed against Fitzgerald, and the knife plunged into the Professor's stomach.

The cultist toppled to the floor.

This time Fitzgerald screamed with pain, and when he doubled over, he didn't come back up. He fell on top of the cultist who had stabbed him, slid off, still screaming, and rolled to his side.

I looked up.

Where are the snakes?

The storm—a frenzied rain slashing across the roof in heavy wind—raged above. The rain crashed down, drenching the room. The blood was thick, its odor rank. Yet the multi-limbed froglike creatures melted into the rain, screeching as gelatinous muck exploded from their dissolving heads.

Holmes flashed me a look that told me he'd just witnessed something that defied all logic. He looked at me with abject defeat.

I couldn't bear it.

"There's an answer!" I screamed over the storm. "There has to be!" Just then, the rear door banged open, and through the muck of gore, blood, bones, and water surged a band of policemen, led by Detective Bentley.

"I've never been so happy to see that fellow," Holmes said, stripping off his wig and bits of his disguise. I followed suit and then thrust Professor Henry Fitzgerald at Bentley, who grimaced and nodded a greeting. Bentley dragged the cult leader toward the door. Fitzgerald was shivering, his face white. His wound was deep, and blood saturated his clothes. He would require emergency surgery to survive the night.

Despite my hatred for the man, I hoped that he received sufficient care, but I wouldn't operate on him. I would be too tempted to let him die. Yet I wanted answers from Professor Henry Fitzgerald. I wanted him to admit to ordering murders. I wanted him to explain the weird chemistry that Holmes had devised to defeat Willie Jacobs's tram machine. I wanted him to explain all of—

This!

—everything around us in the warehouse, the creatures, the snakes, the bone stacks, the spherical bones, the gold.

The Order of Dagon.

I wanted to *know*.

The police handcuffed as many cultists as they could round up—those who weren't corpses or fleeing the scene— and hauled them outside. Holmes and I leaned against a wall, regaining our breath. Both of us were still panting from our fight with Fitzgerald. I worried that we might grow ill from the cold, the rain, the wind, but we couldn't make our way past the police, who clogged the door with cultists and corpses.

"How did Bentley know to come here?" I asked Holmes.

He hesitated before he answered. It was hard for me to tell what he was really thinking. He controlled his facial expression, and gone was the look

of abject failure. In its place, I saw the look of old—puzzling through facts, analyzing everything he'd seen, every fact, every tidbit of information.

I was greatly relieved.

"I had second thoughts," he finally admitted. "I knew that I couldn't tell the police or Scotland Yard that Fitzgerald was going to unleash monsters on London, but the more I thought about it, Watson, the more I realized that, this time—unlike at Swallowhead Spring—we couldn't leave Fitzgerald's arrest to chance. This man and his underlings are responsible for countless murders, and I knew they would murder again and *again*.

"So just before we departed, I tipped off the Yard, sent a carefully phrased message via courier, and they must have passed orders down to Bentley to show up here tonight. I don't think he found what he expected, but in the end it was far *more*."

"Why didn't Lestrade come, do you think?" I asked.

"I don't know," Holmes answered. "He must be busy with—" his voice was dry "—with more *important* matters."

We fell silent, watching the mayhem around us. Cultists screaming and bashing police with their fists, Bentley supervising the bagging of what seemed to be endless gore and evidence, spherical bones, gold prongs, and the like.

"What the hell is this?" Bentley pointed to the dead body of the froglike Questioner. Holmes only shrugged, as did I. We honestly didn't know much about the strange creatures we'd seen. With a grimace of disgust, the detective wandered off to help his men, and I turned to Holmes and spoke as quietly as I could.

"Space and time," I said. "Holmes, do you think we saw creatures from another realm?"

This time, he didn't laugh at me or sneer at the mention of the supernatural. This time, he steepled his fingers beneath his chin, tilted his head slightly, and gazed across the room, and fell into deep contemplation.

Minutes passed.

I let him think.

Finally, he answered.

"I have defeated Fitzgerald for Moriarty, who in turn, has defeated *me*. Moriarty has gotten what he wants from me and will resume control of London's crime networks. But is he *right* about the nature of Fitzgerald's crime business? Is he *right* about the Order of Dagon, the opening of the

world to deadly monsters and chaos that we cannot possibly conceive, much less destroy?”

He pushed himself off the wall and gestured at me to follow. The police had shoved most of the cultists into carriages and wagons. The door was clear enough for us to exit the warehouse. We stepped into a huge puddle of scummy blood beneath a pewter sky. The rain was a drizzle. The wind was a nip.

Holmes stared at the sky, then at the dilapidated roof of the warehouse.

“Watson…” he said, but then he stopped.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“Watson, there is a rational, scientific explanation for everything that we’ve witnessed. I maintain that we may not comprehend the science in our time, but someday, people like us *will* understand the science. No, Watson, I do not believe in the supernatural. I will never believe in the supernatural.”

“But then—?”

“It is enough,” he said, “that we stopped the machine from killing us on the spot. We slowed it to a crawl. It is enough that we have put Fitzgerald in jail for the crimes of tonight. I am certain he will confess to sending his gang to kill that girl in the East End. I feel certain that he tried to pin that murder on Moriarty, as well as the attempted murder of your family. Remember when we first talked to him in his London home, Fitzgerald said that Moriarty is a criminal mastermind and must be behind the murders. Those were his words, Watson. He was trying to pin murder on Moriarty from the start.”

I nodded, trying to ignore thoughts of Mary and Samuel.

“It is also enough that we have stopped these murders of *the deadly dimensions*,” I said.

“Yes, as you will, Watson, *the murders of the deadly dimensions*, for you always must give my work lurid names in hopes of selling your stories, yes?” For the first time that night, his face lit up, and he smiled. I broke into a grin myself.

“We’ve stopped the murders of any deadly dimensions, as you call them, for which Fitzgerald was responsible. But Watson,” Holmes said, “have you considered that there may be other murders of deadly dimensions, for which Fitzgerald is *not* responsible?”

My grin disappeared. The idea was chilling.

Are there other cult leaders of the Order of Dagon, and are they capable of unleashing the deadly dimensions?

Indeed, were there other factions, other cults, beyond the Order of Dagon? Other monsters, other ways of murdering people?

He must have seen the look of dread on my face.

"Watson," he said firmly, "I can't say this strongly enough. There is no such thing as the supernatural. Nature has tricks up her sleeve that we haven't yet grasped. Nevertheless, everything falls within the embrace of science."

He took my elbow and steered me clear of the warehouse. We hopped on an empty police carriage, and Holmes requested that the driver take us to Baker Street. After checking with Detective Bentley, the driver flicked his reins across the horses, and off we went, soon clattering over the cobblestones toward home.

Home. Where was my home?

I no longer knew.

What had happened to my family?

42

For days, Holmes contemplated the case. Despite the lack of a new mystery to solve, he did not complain of boredom. He reiterated several times how much he'd valued my help nailing Fitzgerald and bringing the tram machine to a simmer.

I stayed with him at 221B Baker Street, unable to sleep alone in the flat I'd shared with Mary and Samuel.

Holmes sent a letter to Kristoffer Beiler, explaining that his father's cult, The Order of Dagon, was effectively shut down for the time being. He suggested that Kristoffer not chant or even whisper anything he'd learned from his father's copy of the *Dagonite Auctoritatem*.

*

Smoking a cigarette, I read the latest newspapers. Holmes puffed on his pipe and tinkered at his chemistry bench. It was early morning, and a sharp rap on the door told us that we had a visitor.

"Enter!" Holmes called, and the door whisked open. It was Inspector Lestrade.

"And where have you been, sir," Holmes asked, "while we were defeating notorious criminals here in London?" He leaned on the mantel and put his other hand in his jacket pocket. His eyes sparked with curiosity, and he probably hoped that Lestrade had brought him a new case to solve.

"May I?" Lestrade asked, gesturing toward Holmes's favorite chair.

"Be my guest," Holmes said.

The Inspector settled his small frame into the large chair. His toes barely reached the floor. Rather than look at Holmes, he addressed me.

"Dr. Watson, I have good news," he said. "After Scotland Yard arrested Fitzgerald and his gang, your wife surfaced."

My heart leapt.

"What?" I cried.

"Pray tell us," Holmes urged.

Lestrade beamed at me.

"Yes, she'd been living under an assumed name, working as a maid at a guesthouse, living in the countryside near Half Moon Bay. Of course, she had the baby with her."

“Oh, thank God!” I exclaimed. “Where are they?”

“They’re safe. They’re at headquarters right now. I’ll take you.”

“But how—?”

“She left your home right under our noses, Doctor. She’d seen you don disguises often enough, and so she used your kit and did the same. Disguised herself, slipped right past us with the baby tucked under her coat. Once the papers started broadcasting the news about Fitzgerald’s arrest, she got in touch with me and inquired about the safety of a return to London. I’d been looking for her all along, Doctor, as I’d promised.”

I jumped from my chair, and both Holmes and I quickly slipped into our coats and hats. We grabbed our walking sticks.

“There’s a carriage outside,” Lestrade said, opening the door to 221B. “You’re coming with us, Mr. Holmes?”

“Of course, he’s coming,” I said.

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything,” Holmes said. “I never got time to properly say hello to Samuel, did I? I must make up for that.”

As we hurried down the front stairs and to the carriage, I asked Lestrade why my wife had elected to go to Half Moon Bay, of all places.

“She didn’t say much about it,” he answered, striking the inside of the carriage with his stick, and the horses set off, clacking across the cobblestones. “She only said that she’d heard that the mistletoe was beautiful there at this time of year. Right before they fully ripen, she said.”

“Really? Why, that’s odd,” I said.

“Is it?” Holmes said. “When you swap stories with Mary, I trust you’ll find that *your* story is much more peculiar than hers.”

Still, I thought, *Half Moon Bay and mistletoe ripening?*

Fitzgerald had claimed that the cult’s fertility rites had been fulfilled at Half Moon Bay between the Supreme Almighty and his Half Moon Bay breeding mate, Amelia Scarcliffe.

I didn’t believe in coincidences, and my chest tightened. As if guessing my thoughts, Holmes tried to set my mind at ease.

“It’s beautiful countryside out that way, Watson. Your wife selected a good location. Do not let it worry you. Just be happy that she’s back, and with your son.” We exchanged a glance, and I saw a flicker of doubt in his eyes.

For the moment, I took him at his word. My family had returned, and they were safe. I sank against the back of the seat. My mind floated.

Mary and Samuel.

Mistletoe.

Druids.

Dagon.

Half-awake, I saw multi-limbed creatures and snakelike entities. The world was awash with colors and symbols.

I forced myself to focus on what mattered, and I dozed off, my mind filled with images of Mary and Samuel… and of my good friend, Sherlock Holmes.

EPILOGUE

KOENRAAD THWAITE

Half Moon Bay Amelia Scarcliffe sat beneath the mistletoe by the sacred cliff. We'd mated constantly on the slab of open waters, and I was sure that Amelia carried my offspring. I waved at Koos, and he lumbered over to my mate, offering a tray of her favorite tea and biscuits. She nodded, a supreme queen already, and serenely gazed at me as Koos poured tea and tucked a napkin beneath her fluttering gills.

I'd injected her with my potency.

She was one with Dagon now. We were his. Entirely.

Fitzgerald had failed, but it didn't matter to me. I would find a replacement for him soon enough. In the end, all that mattered was the hatching of my offspring. It would mark the beginning of the great return of Dagon and the Others, those who had ruled from the dawn of time.

We were finite.

They were infinite.

We were mortal.

They were *forever*.

I'd heard about Sherlock Holmes and his friend, Dr. Watson. My sources told me that the two had destroyed the Order of Dagon in London and at Swallowhead Spring. I was not concerned.

Holmes and Watson would bow to me. They would utter the sacred words. They'd do anything for Dagon, even kill. They would see that the only true religion was that of Dagon. Not Christianity, not the Druidic religion, not anything concocted by humans.

I gazed into the eyes of my beloved Amelia, and in them, I saw tomorrow and forever.

Infinity.

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Thank you to my husband, Arie Bodek, for giving me the time and freedom to write this book. Arie is far more than the sidekick of a Sherlock Holmes vs. Cthulhu writer. He's also a professor of physics, and as such, serves as my first reader, seeking anything scientifically illogical.

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And now, a few notes:

Whitechapel Lunatic Asylum is my own creation, based on the nearby Bethnal Green Lunatic Asylum. All characters related to the asylum are fictional.

Half Moon Bay on the Dorset coast is my own creation.

The *Dagonite Auctoritatem* is my own creation.

Randolph's Cigars and Fine Liquors, and Seaway's Fresh Fish, are fictional shops.

As per H. P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth,* Captain Obed returned from Otaheite, which is now called Tahiti, bringing with him the cult practices that gave rise to the Order of Dagon. The Dagon language in this book is my own creation and merges Cthulhu Mythos phrases and sounds with Tahitian terms from the 1800s. For this, I am indebted to *A Tahitian and English Dictionary, with Introductory Remarks on the Polynesian Language, and a Short Grammar of the Tahitian Dialect* by John Davies (Tahiti: The London Missionary Society Press, 1851).

A few Mennonite families who build furniture moved to Shropshire in 2012. There is no link between these modern Mennonites and the fictional Dagon-worshipping, furniture-building Beilers.

I hope you enjoy this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Truly, this was a labor of love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LOIS H. GRESH is the *New York Times* bestselling author (six times) of 28 books and more than 65 short stories, as well as the editor of the anthologies *Innsmouth Nightmares* and *Dark Fusions*. She is a well-known Lovecraftian writer whose works have appeared in *Black Wings of Cthulhu*, *The Madness of Cthulhu*, and many other anthologies. Her work has been published in 22 languages. *Sherlock Holmes vs. Cthulhu: The Adventure of the Deadly Dimensions* is the first in her new trilogy of Holmes thrillers. Lois is a frequent guest of honor author at large genre conventions and has appeared on television series such as the History Channel's *Ancient Aliens* and *Batman Tech*. You can follow her adventures with Sherlock Holmes at www.facebook.com/lois.gresh and www.loisgresh.com.

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